In the six years that the Autobots have been on Earth, humanity has enjoyed the most prosperous era in its history. With the Autobots, they had nothing to fear. With the Autobots, they were untouched, untroubled by anything the Universe could throw at them. But then came San Francisco. Then came the greatest threat they had ever faced. Then came the Kaiju.
K-Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prologue

When I was a kid, whenever I'd feel small or lonely, I'd look up at the stars. Wondered if there was life out there. I was right.

I was eight when Mission City was devastated by an alien attack. The government tried to cover it up, to pretend it never happened, but they hadn't counted on the sheer number of recordings captured on cameras and cell phones. The recordings soon found their way onto the internet, and it was only days until the secret was out. And that was when they told us: we weren't alone in the Universe.

The public was in uproar. Riots broke out all over the world, countries strengthened their military, international relationships began to break. Everyone was fearful of another attack. But that attack never came. Instead, the aliens came out into the open, unafraid of showing themselves. They helped repair the damage they had caused, rescuing hundreds of people from the rubble, and saving the lives of hundreds more. Government estimates predicted that their efforts would save billions of dollars. The Autobots were labelled heroes.

We were desperate to know everything about the aliens, so the Autobots became rockstars. The media clamoured for interviews, the tabloids fought to get exclusive photos. Toys, cartoons and movies were made celebrating their achievements. Car manufacturers offered to pay millions for the Autobots to endorse their companies. The 'Transformania' lasted for several years, helped by the intermittent arrival of more of the alien robots. Humanity was obsessed.

Over the next few years, the Autobots continued to prove themselves, helping out with earthquakes, floods, oil spills, and the swine flu pandemic. Occasionally, they would fight off an attack from an opposing faction of alien robots. The five years from two thousand and eight to twenty-thirteen was one of the most prosperous periods mankind had ever seen. With the Autobots, we had nothing to fear. With the Autobots, we were untouched, untroubled by anything the Universe could throw at us.

But then came San Francisco. Then came the greatest threat humanity had ever faced. Then came the Kaiju.

Chapter 1: K-Day

August 10, 2013 – Autobot Command, 0830 hours

Over the past few years, an advanced team of Autobots have taken refuge on Earth under my command. Together, we form an Emergency Response Unit. Our job is to protect the people of Earth from the threats their very planet throws against them.

"What's the latest, Ratchet?" Optimus asked, walking up beside the Autobot medic. Ratchet was monitoring a large array of screens, all of which were showing various news reports happening in San Francisco. His assistant, Jolt, was trawling through complicated graphs and data tables on a nearby console.
"Still not sure, Prime," Ratchet said. "We know something's heading towards the Bay, but no one knows what it is. I've asked the Pentagon to clarify, but they say they're in the dark too. Jolt's hacked in for good measure, but it appears as if they're telling the truth this time."

"Looks like we may have an emergency on our hands. Watch the situation carefully, and if anything happens, let me know."

"Will do, Prime."

~8~

One of the greatest assets to our efforts is Wheeljack. A great scientist on Cybertron, he had a keen eye for experimenting. On Earth, his experiments have largely been successful, and he has greatly improved the lives of humans and Autobots during the three short years he has been here.

"Wheeljack, how goes the weapons testing?"

"It's going excellent as usual, Optimus. I've removed Ironhide's arm cannons and supplied him with pistols he can store on his back. Should make it a lot easier for him to get into tight spaces now," the Autobot scientist said, tossing one of the weapons specialist's canons aside.

"Hopefully he won't explode," Mirage said. "Your experiments are always exploding, Wheeljack."

Wheeljack sighed. "Those guns aren't experiments, Mirage. I've been working on them for years. They're smaller, sleeker, lighter...superior to the cannons in every way."

"Hmph," Crosshairs said. "Sounds like you've just copied my guns and given them to 'hide over here."

"That's not true, Crosshairs, and you know it. I designed Ironhide's new weapons from scratch, specifically as replacements for his cannons.

Ironhide tossed one of his new guns from hand to hand. "I liked my cannons," he grumbled. "Made me look tough."

"You always look tough, Ironhide," Chromia said kindly, patting the old Autobot on the knee.

"Pah, take it outside you two," Mirage said, turning away from the display of affection.

Optimus smiled and left the Weapons room, leaving Mirage and Chromia to their argument.

~8~

Although we are all happy on Earth, I sometimes think that our job is too dull for some of us. The younger Autobots were born in war, and killing Decepticons is all they know. I can only pray that they eventually outgrow their violent tendencies.

"Hyah!" Drift shouted, and he jumped off the platform, his sword raised above his head. His target was right in front of him, and he brought the sword down - only for it to be blocked.

"It'll take more than that to get the better of me!" Sideswipe grinned, and he lashed out and kicked Drift away. Transforming his hand into a blaster, he fired several shots over the Autobot swordsman's head. "I win...again."

"Only because you used your guns," Drift snapped, pushing himself to his feet. "If it was swords only, it wouldn't even be a competition."
"Hey now, don't go startin' an argument, because we all know who the best fighter is: me!"

Drift and Sideswipe scowled as Jazz swung down from a catwalk.

"Sure, Jazz. The day you learn how to pick up a sword, let me know," Drift said. Jazz was infamous for his lack of competence with any sort of melee weapon, mainly because he'd never bothered trying one.

"Hey now, we all know swords and me don't get along. I think I'll just stick to my guns."

Sideswipe and Drift exchanged glances. Sideswipe grinned.

"Hey Jazz, look. Jolt's outside his lab!" Sideswipe said, indicating a spot behind Jazz.

"Really? Where?" Jazz turned, and was promptly knocked sideways by a blow from Drift's sword.

"Hey, that wasn't funny!"

~8~

Thankfully though, not all of us have expressed our idleness with violence. The Wreckers have thankfully decided to express their boredom almost constant construction.

"Tell me again," Arcee said, "what the point of this is?"

"Extra protection against rockslides and avalanches," Leadfoot explained. "If you're working in an area just after a landslide, chances are there'll be another while you're there. If you wear this, your paint ain't gonna get scratched."

"Wreckers' guarantee," Topspin added.

"So it's a suit of armour?" Elita-One asked. "Can you imagine Ironhide putting that on?"

Roadbuster sighed. "We don' care what that big idiot looks like, just as long as he uses the damn thing. I'll stop all the scratches he keeps getting. You should hear Wheeljack grumble about how much paint he goes through every year. It's taking up too much of his budget, he says."

"Wheeljack's problems are Wheeljack's problems," Arcee said. "Ironhide should just be thankful that he hasn't blown up yet."

"I don't understand Wheeljack's 'putation," Leadfoot said. "He don't blow stuff up any more than we do."

"You tell us when to expect it. With Wheeljack, it just happens."

~8~

While most of us have forged strong bonds of friendship over the years, there is an exception to the rule. Mudflap and Skids have irritated everyone at some stage or another, but hopefully they'll soon grow out of it.

Hound whistled cheerfully to himself as he polished one of his many guns. Although he rarely had to use them, he always made sure they were well looked after and remained in top condition. After all, you never know when they might come in handy. He remembered an incident a year ago, when several humans had been taken hostage by a group of terrorists. The only way to free the hostages was to injure the terrorists from range - something Ironhide's cannons couldn't do without blowing
both parties into oblivion. Hound was happy to provide the solution.

Suddenly, a loud thump on the wall interrupted his work. Hound stopped whistling and listened intently for any further sounds. Sure enough, raised voices could be heard from the next room.

Sighing, Hound stood up. "Do they ever learn?" he muttered, and made to go for door, before deciding that smashing through the wall would be much more effective.

CRASH!

The Twins stopped fighting immediately and stared up at Hound.

"How many times have I told you two to cut it out?" Hound rumbled, picking up the small, troublesome Autobots with ease. "If you two can't behave, I'll send you to Wheeljack's laboratory. I hear he's working on something big."

Skids and Mudflap glanced at each other.

"Uh, he did it, not me!" Skids said immediately. "You can't go blamin' me for something this idiot decided to do."

"Hey, that ain't fair!" Mudflap retorted. "You started it! You said my arm was too big!"

"I was just statin' a fact. If you can't accept life -"

"You, Skids, shut up," Hound said before the situation got out of hand. "Your arm's too big too. Now quit it or you're both going to Wheeljack."

The Twins nodded meekly, and Hound promptly dropped them.

"Ow! That hurt!"

"Good. Might do you good to feel some pain now and then."

"Aw, Hound, we're sorry. I won't do it again," Mudflap promised. "I don't know about Skids here, though, you can't control him."

"All right, that's it," Skids said, and flung himself at his brother, pummelling his fists into the orange metal.

Fortunately for the Twins, Hound was stopped from taking further action by alarms blaring through the building, followed by the sound of Optimus' voice over the comm. system.

"All Autobots to report to the Control Room; this is an emergency!"

All thoughts of the Twins disappeared from Hound's circuits, and he hastened to the Control Room.

A few seconds later, Mudflap looked up. "Hey, where did Hound go?" he said. "Look what you did, you made him go away!"

"That wasn't me, I thought I heard Optimus saying something over the speaker things," Skids replied.

"No you didn't."

"Yeah I did."
"That's what you think."

"No, that's what you think."

The pair of them continued arguing all the way to the Control Room.

~8~

0930 hours

'Breaking news, a giant monster has just emerged from beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. My god, it - it must be at least three hundred feet tall!'

the news reporter said. It was evident from his voice that he was panicking, and for good reason. Giant monsters attacking cities was a concept usually reserved for the cinema.

"Ratchet, any idea where that creature has come from?" Optimus asked.

"None I'm afraid. I've looked in the relevant databases, but the search comes up clean. No one has a clue."

"It could not have appeared from nowhere," Optimus mused.

The door behind him whooshed open, allowing the other Autobots entry.

"We're all here, Prime," Ironhide reported. "What's the crisis?"

Optimus stepped aside, allowing the Autobots to gaze upon the scene in San Francisco. A giant monster was approaching the Golden Gate Bridge, its arms reaching out to scrape against the metal pylons. Cars crossing the bridge skidded to a halt, their frightened occupants staring out the window to get a look at the behemoth towering above them.

"Now that is one big ugly monster," Jazz said. "Wouldn't want to be in the way of that thing."

"Well, those people are," Chromia pointed out. She turned to Optimus. "Are we heading over there to stop it?"

"Yes. If this creature is hostile, the amount of damage it could cause would be catastrophic. Even if is not, there is still a strong possibility that it will cause a large amount of damage, merely because of its size."

"That sort of damage?," Crosshairs asked, pointing at the screen. The Autobots looked up at the screen just in time to see the monster collide with the bridge, letting out a triumphant roar. Its thick, long and clawed forearms tore the bitumen to shreds; the suspension cables snapped, and the bridge buckled, unable to resist the amount of force being applied to it.

The Autobots watched anxiously, hoping that the monster would stop moving forward. But it didn't. It plowed through the bridge, paying no attention to the cars, people and trucks that were sent plummeting into the waters below. Like a mindless beast, it lumbered forward, shrugging off the bits of steel that collapsed against its frame.

Optimus clenched his fist. "Autobots, it appears as though humanity once again is in need of our help. Time to roll out"

"Affirmative, Prime," Ironhide replied. "Autobots, to the hanger!"

Optimus laid a hand on Topspin's shoulder as the Wrecker moved to follow Ironhide out of the
control room.

"Topspin, I want you, Roadbuster and Leadfoot to remain here. While I doubt our services will be needed elsewhere while the monster is attacking San Francisco, it always helps to be prepared."

Topspin's shoulders slumped. After several weeks of boredom, he had been looking forward for the chance to give his wheels a good run. "If you say so, Optimus," he sighed.

"Thank you, Topspin," the Autobot leader replied, before transforming and driving towards the hanger exit.

"Wreckers, get your axles over here!" Topspin shouted. "We're on housekeeping duty."

~8~

1230 hrs

'San Francisco is now a war zone … I have just received information telling me that the US Airforce is sending in jets to take the creature down … dear god, the creature just destroyed that F-22! It's a complete wreck, no chance of survival … the President has urged for citizens of San Francisco to evacuate as quickly as possible … the Autobots are en route and are expected to arrive in less than half an hour.' With these words, the world let out a small breath of relief. Everyone had seen the Autobots perform miracles; it was time to see if they could pull off another.

The flight to San Francisco was spent in silence as the Autobots listened to the endless news reports describing the monster's attack. It had now reached the mainland, and had cut a wide path of destruction through the city. Thousands had been evacuated, by thousands still remained in danger. All efforts to take down the beast had failed. Humanity was relying on the Autobots now.

"Prepare for drop in T-minus two minutes," the pilot announced.

"Ugh, finally," Sideswipe moaned. "I hate being in planes."

"Tell me about it," Wheeljack agree. "I'd much rather be in my lab." He paused. "I hope I remembered to turn my particle accelerator off before we left. I don't have the budget to do the experiment again."

"All you're worried about is your budget, Wheeljack?" Jazz piped up. "I'd be worried about the whole building going up!"

Wheeljack bristled. "Are you ever going to let that one incident go?"

"No," Sideswipe and Jazz said together.

"One minute to drop. Lowering the hatch." Right on queue, the back of the aircraft began lowering down, exposing the inside to the howling wind.

"Autobots, you're cleared for the drop."

Optimus accelerated forwards and drove out of the aircraft, transforming as he went. Once in robot mode, he pointed his face down, accelerating towards the ground. Glancing left and right, he saw his fellow Autobots performing similar manoeuvres. They fell freely for several seconds, before triggering parachutes to slow their descent. Once they were within a safe falling distance, the parachute cords were cut, and they fell briefly before landing safely on the ground.
"What a wreck," Jolt said distastefully, looking around.

They had landed on the edge of San Francisco Harbour, right in the middle of the path of destruction the creature had forged. Ahead of them plumes of smoke rose out of destroyed buildings, while rubble and other debris lay strewn across the roads. Parts of the city still burned, even hours after the attack, a three mile wide line of destruction and death painting the creature's path far too easily.

"Reminds me of Cybertron," Ironhide observed. "All the destruction... all the death."

"It's almost as bad as that, I'm afraid," Ratchet said sadly. "All of this was caused by one creature. On Cybertron, it would have meant that Trypticon had gone for a walk."

"Like he did at Tyger Pax," Arcee said. "I'll never forget that day." She shivered. "Trypticon... Megatron crushing Bumblebee's voice chip... thank Primus he's still with Sam."

Optimus wandered over to a crushed building. Shifting through the rubble, he soon found the bodies of a family. "'Till all are one," he murmured softly.

"What are we going to do, Optimus?" Hound asked. "We've rarely faced anything this big before."

"Attack the thing, of course," Drift said. "Anyone got ideas?"

"We could, uh, you know, retreat," Skids suggested hopefully, earning a look of utmost disgust from Elita One.

"Well, aiming for the legs would make the most logical sense," Wheeljack said. "Once its mobility is gone, it is a perfect target for any military bombardment. If I remember correctly from the news reports, its ankles and wrists appear to be the least heavily armored parts of its body, so we should aim for them if we can."

"Sounds like a plan," Sideswipe said. "But how am I going to navigate through all this rubble?" He looked down at his wheeled feet in dismay.

"You could try jumping. Yo' got good suspension, you'll be fine! Hey Mudflap, can you imagine Sideswipe jumping up and down like one of them kangaroos?" Skids started laughing.

Elita-One rolled her optics, transformed her hand into a gun, and shot Skids in the chest.

"Will you shut up?" she hissed. "Sometimes I wonder why Primus bothered making you two!"

"Hey now, I've got nothing to do with this," Mudflap said hurriedly. "That was all Skids' fault."

"I've changed my mind," Chromia stated. "I wish Bumblebee was here, if only to keep you two in line! Now shut it!"

Mirage snorted. "Look at us. We're facing one of the biggest enemies we've ever encountered, and all we can do is quibble!"

"Alright, alright, let's focus on the job at hand," Crosshairs said. "We have a three hundred foot monster a couple of miles ahead of us. Weakpoints are legs, ankles and wrists. Optimus, we need a battle plan now."

Several jets flew overhead, heading for the cloud of smoke that contained the monster. The sound of heavy machine gun fire was heard a second later, followed by a loud, horrible roar, before a
small explosion blossomed in the distance.

Optimus stared off determinedly into the distance, before turning to face his fellow Autobots. "Mirage, Sideswipe, Drift, you three climb the creature's legs and cut the tendons in its knees. Hound, you and Ironhide concentrate your fire on the hip joints. Arcee, help Elita One and Chromia evacuate humans from the area. The rest of you, do whatever you need to do to bring that thing down. It must not get past San Francisco!"

"What about you, Prime?" Ironhide asked.

"I shall aim for the ankles," Optimus replied. "Autobots, transform and roll out!"

Chapter End Notes

A collaborative project between myself and a friend, this story has been on our minds since the first week of the year. We didn't start planning it in earnest until I actually saw Pacific Rim, but seriously, we have been planning every single detail of this story. Character bios, a timeline...you name it. The reason we need so much is because this story is going to span the entirety of the Kaiju War - all 12 years of it. It's going to be massive.

The story uses the Transformers Movieverse continuity (ie: Bayformers), but with a few crucial differences - Revenge of the Fallen, Dark of the Moon and Age of Extinction never happened. Instead, the Autobots were revealed to the world after the Decepticon attack on Mission City. So no spaceship on the moon, no sun harvester in the Great Pyramid. We are keeping the Autobots from the sequels though, as you probably realised. We're also borrowing bits and pieces from other TF continuities as well, specifically G1 and Aligned (the Cybertron games and the Prime cartoon).

Aside from that all, my friend and I strongly encourage feedback, especially constructive criticism. We want to make this story the best it can be, but we can only achieve that with your input. I'll also be going back and editing older chapters as we continue to revise them.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2 - The Trespasser

The Autobots drove slowly through the city, following the trail of destroyed buildings and roads. Clouds of dust, smoke and fog created a sense of impending doom, and the rubble, glass, concrete and bitumen strewn out across the ground only added to the atmosphere. No bodies could be seen, thankfully, but they all knew that a quick search through any one of the destroyed buildings would unearth a crushed corpse.

They continued driving, with only occasional jet flying overhead breaking the spell of silence. Eventually, though, they came across a wall of shattered concrete, forcing them to shift into robot mode to pass the obstruction. Once they cleared the wall though, they stopped, and looked up.

"Primus," Sideswipe breathed.

The Autobots had caught up with the creature, and were standing less than five hundred metres behind it. It had looked big on the news reports, but in real life, it was monstrous, towering above both them and the nearby buildings, its clawed hands cutting through concrete and steel with ease.

"It took half the Autobot army to bring Trypticon down," Arcee whispered fearfully. "I hope this thing will be a lot easier."

"My analysis suggests it will be," Ratchet observed. "This creature is organic, and our weapons should be strong enough to pierce its hide. Trypticon was -"

He was interrupted by another of the monster's terrible roars. A second later, one of its smaller arms lashed out and collided with yet another jet. A small explosion blossomed as the jet broke up, the debris flying through the air before landing some distance away.

"Idiots," Ironhide snorted. "That's the fifth jet I've seen destroyed that way so far. Don't they realise the dangers of flying so close to that thing?"

"They are desperate, Ironhide," Optimus replied. "Desperation drives all of us to commit acts we would not normally attempt to do."

"Well, then, we need to make sure they get un-desperate," Jazz chimed in."This giant monster looks like it wants a beating!"

"Then a beating it shall receive!" Optimus said firmly. "Autobots, take that monster down!"

With the scraping of metal, the Autobots transformed and sped towards their respective targets. Arcee, Chromia and Elita-One zoomed off to the sides to scour the debris for survivors, while Ratchet, Wheeljack, Crosshairs, Jolt and the Twins drove over towards a relatively undamaged building, transforming once again before starting to climb the structure. The rest of the Autobots closed in on the monster, but it quickly became apparent that there was a flaw in their planned method of attack.

"That thing's ankles are close to its knees," Mirage grumbled. "It's going to be hard to fight with four of us in the same spot."
"Split up, then," Drift said. "Two per leg."

"Excellent idea, Drift," Optimus said. "Mirage and I will tackle the left leg, you and Sideswipe take down the right."

Ironhide and Hound suddenly veered off from the rest of the group, skidding to a halt some three hundred and fifty metres away from the monster before transforming.

"We're going to stay here, Prime," Ironhide clarified. "These guns Wheeljack made need testing, and Hound wants to use some of his Penetrator Missiles."

"Okay, Ironhide. Target the monster's hip when I give the signal."

"Will do, Prime."

"Optimus, Jolt, Wheeljack, Crosshairs and I have taken up position on a building not too far from your position. Crosshairs has run off somewhere with the Twins, but the rest of us should be able to keep you informed of the bigger picture, and let you know how your efforts are going."

"Thank you, Ratchet. Make sure you get in touch with the humans and let them know that we are now engaging the monster."

"Jolt's just doing that now. He's trying to get their military to stop the jets from flying in."

"Excellent. Enough life has been lost today; we do not need any more to be thrown away so senselessly."

The gap between the Autobots and the monster was now less than a hundred metres, and the beast's shadow loomed over them. Just ahead, the monstrous, clawed foot was embedded deep in the bitumen, carving out a large crater.

"Wahey, watch out, you big sucker, here I come!" Jazz shouted as he drove right up to the monster's foot. Just as he was about to crash into the thick skin, he transformed to robot mode, fired his grappling hook onto a huge spike protruding from the creature's knee and used the momentum to swing himself up onto it.

"Optimus, the monster's noticed you," Ratchet warned. "I suggest you transform now."

He was right. The monster had felt Jazz crawl up onto his knee, and had turned around to see what the distraction was. Its eyes were now firmly fixed on the four vehicles that were speeding towards his feet.

"Autobots, prepare to transform...now!" Optimus commanded. As one, he, Mirage, Drift and Sideswipe initiated their transformations, jumping up and landing on the monster's foot. Wasting no time, Optimus, extended his energon blades, and stabbed it into the flesh of the beast, eliciting a roar of pain from the creature.

Optimus felt the skin move below him, and he realised that the foot had been raised. Evidently the monster was going to attempt to shake him and Mirage loose.

"Mirage!" he called. "Hold on!"

But he was too late; the foot began moving from side to side. While the action wasn't fast, the movement was nevertheless sufficient enough to knock the red Autobot from his position, and back on to the crushed bitumen below. Mirage barely had enough time to transform and reverse rapidly
backwards before the foot came thudding down on the spot he had occupied seconds before.

Optimus looked to his right; Sideswipe and Drift had made their way up the leg to the creature's ankle and knee, and were in the process of plunging their weapons deep into the monster's hide.

"Ironhide, we are in position. Commence your strike now!" he ordered.


By now, Mirage had managed to jump onto the beast's foot again, but was making sure that his blades were providing ample grip. Satisfied that his friend was safe, Optimus began climbing up the limb towards the ankle.

"Incoming!" Hound shouted over the Autobots' communication channel, and a second later, a barrage of missiles collided with the monster, right on the hip joint. There was a loud explosion, and small pieces of shrapnel rained down on Optimus and his team, along with blobs of a strange, blue substance, which sizzled upon coming into contact with Optimus' frame.

Making a mental note to ask Ratchet to identify the blue substance once the battle was over, Optimus finally reached the creature's ankle, and stabbed his energon sword into the flesh, hard. A bellowing roar of agony followed immediately afterwards. The Autobots had wounded the beast, and it knew it.

Just above Optimus, Mirage's blades were covered in more of the blue substance, and Drift and Sideswipe had made deep gashes on the other leg. Jazz, on the other hand, was still waiting patiently on the monster's spiked knee, apparently waiting for something to happen. Optimus got his answer moments later, as one of the monster's larger arms loomed over him, preparing to crush him. Jazz immediately leapt into action, shooting the arm several times with his shield-gun in order to distract the beast.

"Hey now, don't go hurtin' my friends!" he shouted, grappling from the knee to the arm, "that's my job!" He ran up the arm towards the shoulder, ignoring the movement of the limb as it reacted to the sensation of the Autobot running across it. The second of the larger arms reached across to squash him, but he quickly grappled to the shoulder, then the head in quick succession.

Despite his task at hand, Optimus watched as his lieutenant slowly climbed on to the side of the monsters face and proceeded to shoot it in one of its many eyes. Another roar of pain, a furious shake of the head, and Jazz went flying, landing heavily on a nearby building. The creature turned triumphantly to finish off its prey, it's arms reaching out eagerly, before recoiling in pain.

Crosshairs was running as fast as he could towards Jazz, firing his guns directly at the monster's face, hitting it the mouth and eyes - anything to stop it from killing his friend. The creature growled angrily, raising one of its smaller arms to block Crosshairs' onslaught. The green Autobot soon reached Jazz, and hauled him over his shoulder before running off to safety.

A second barrage of missiles flew over Optimus' head, this time colliding with the other hip joint. As the second of the smaller arms moved down to asses the damage, Optimus saw two figures jump from a building to the arm; twin blurs of green and orange. Mudflap and Skids had finally decided to join the fight.

The creature had now well and truly forgotten Jazz, and was now entirely focused on ridding itself of the annoyances climbing all over it. It stamped and stomped, scratched its legs, but the Autobots were too good. Their blades and swords had penetrated deep into the monster's flesh, and no amount of rapid movement would dislodge them. When an arm loomed over them, the Autobots
would quickly swing around to the other side of the leg and resume their attack, out of reach of the huge, clawed hands. But as much as they were enjoying success, Optimus knew their luck would not hold out forever. They needed to finish the job and kill the beast before they suffered any major injuries, or worse.

Determined to not let that version of events happen, Optimus moved his sword higher before transforming his other hand into his Ion Blaster. He opened fire, the gun causing the monster's flesh to sizzle, and the wound inflicted by his sword to deepen. More missiles from Hound and Ironhide collided with the monster as Optimus continued firing, burning his way through the monster's flesh.

A shout from above caught his attention, and he looked up to see the smaller of the creature's right arms fall limp. The Twins had somehow managed to tear most of the limb from the monster's torso, with only a few ribbons of skin connecting the two, and were now attempting to pull it off. Jumping from their perch on the beast's torso, they quickly grappled to the arm, and maneuvered themselves until they were both dangling precariously from the hand. A few seconds later, their combined weight tore the limb completely from the creature's body. The monster let out a shriek of absolute agony as more of the blue substance spurted from its body, splashing all over the surrounding buildings and the bitumen below.

Gravity had now taken control of the arm, and it hurtled towards the ground. The Twins, however, quickly grappled to a nearby building for safety.

By now, the beast was in distress. The loss of its smaller arm had sent it into shock, and the immense pain from the wounds to its face, hips, knees and ankles made it delirious. Raspining out cries of agony, it began to move, stumbling through the surrounding buildings, destroying everything in its path.

"Hold on!" Optimus shouted, quickly deploying his second energon sword and stabbing it into the monster. None of them could afford to be dislodged now. "We're nearly there!"

With a shout of triumph, Drift cut through a tendon in the knee, crippling the monster further. It's right leg collapsed under the weight, nearly crushing Drift and Sideswipe in the process.

"Drift, Sideswipe, get out of there now!" Ratchet advised. "You've done all you can."

The two Autobots obeyed and jumped off the monster's leg, transforming and driving away to safety, leaving the monster collapsed on the ground behind them, unable to move.

With a note of grim satisfaction, Optimus realised that their job was done. The creature wouldn't be going anywhere, and it was only a matter of time before it died of blood loss or shock. All they needed to do now was to make its death as merciful as possible.

"Mirage," he called, "disengage. It's up to Ironhide and Hound how."

"Incoming!" Hound shouted, and another barrage of missiles went flying over Mirage and Optimus' heads as they drove away from the creature. The missiles struck the beast in the neck, sending it reeling backwards, a new hole created in its skin. Two plasma shells from Ironhide soon followed, deepening the wound by burning away the skin and flesh. Finally, Hound fired a final barrage of penetrator missiles, which gouged their way into the exposed flesh, before exploding with a mighty bang.

With a long, mournful moan, the creature staggered, clutching at the gaping hole in its neck. Its arms splayed wildly, crashing into the surrounding buildings, before it teetered forwards, and
crashed onto the ground with a mighty thud. The impact shook the ground, and the resultant shockwave spread from the point of impact, shaking buildings, knocking the Autobots off their feet, sending a huge cloud of dust into the air.

Three hundred and fifty metres away, the Autobots got to their feet and surveyed the area. All visible buildings were damaged beyond recognition, the road was barely intact, and pools of the blue liquid had collected everywhere. But the centre of attention was, of course, the monster. It had taken a huge effort, but the fight was over. The Autobots had saved the day once again.

Chapter End Notes

First Kaiju down, a lot more to come. Feedback on how easy/hard it was for the Autobots to take Trespasser down is welcomed.
"Then a beating it shall receive!" Optimus said firmly. "Autobots, take that monster down!"

With the scraping of metal, the Autobots transformed and sped towards their respective targets. Arcee, Chromia and Elita-One veered off from the main group and headed for the piles of debris. They pulled up next to a collapsed building and transformed once again, scanning the dusty concrete with their optics.

"Okay, search and rescue mode...activated," Acree said. Her body began to shift, pieces rearranging themselves until the wheels she used for movement had become legs, and her optics turned yellow as she used infrared radiation to scan for life signs. Behind her, Chromia and Elita-One did the same. Their status as triple changers was only recent; Wheeljack had given them an additional alternate mode after they realised their wheeled, monopedal robot modes were awkward and cumbersome on the rough debris created by the Christchurch earthquake in 2011. As such, they now utilised their 'legs' mode to great effect in disaster zones.

"The humans were ordered to evacuate soon after the monster destroyed the bridge," Chromia said. "If we're lucky, we might not have to save anyone."

"If only…" Arcee muttered. She'd found that humans and Cybertronians were uncannily similar in their behaviour when presented with difficult situations: unpredictable. There were sure to be several people who hadn't evacuated for some reason or another, or someone who had come to rescue a loved one but ended up becoming trapped themselves.

They continued scanning as they crossed into the Chinatown district of the city. There were no signs of life, but the more personal effects of the monster's presence were all too obvious.

"I'm picking up heat signatures," Elita said, "but I'm not registering any heartbeat. I think they've gone offline."

"They stood no chance against their buildings falling in on them," Chromia said sadly. "They would have been dead before they knew what had happened."

"If they were lucky," Arcee added drily.

They continued searching in silence for several more minutes, all too aware of the raging battle behind them. The roars of the monster as their fellow Autobots attempted to take it down carried swiftly through the air, and Arcee couldn't quell the rising fear that the beast was getting closer. It had already damaged this part of San Francisco...if it was driven into the area again, there wouldn't be much to salvage.

"All clear," Elita said as once they reached the end of the street. "No functioning humans detected."

"Split up," Arcee decided. "Chromia, take the street on the right, Elita, you take the one on the
Both Autobots nodded, and they ran off down the rubble-strewn road. Arcee doubled back a short
distance before heading down a side-street. Older, brick buildings lined the curb - what was left of
them at least. Only a few of the houses had more than three floors, and there were even one or two
that didn't have any. Arcee groaned. Bricks were a pain to sift through, especially since Optimus
had forbidden any use of weapons to make the job easier after a particularly nasty incident in
Christchurch. She quickly closed off and partitioned that particular memory; she had more
important things to worry about, and couldn't afford any more distractions. She began walking
down the street, her head moving slowly from side to side, scanning for any signs of human life.

"Got one!" Chromia shouted suddenly. "Pulse is faint, but she's functional!"

"Great!" Arcee said. "You know what to do; download .-

"Download the co-ordinates to the nearest hospital, drop the human off, come right back. If search
complete, rendezvous with Optimus and the others," Chromia finished. "Come on, 'Cee, we've
been doing this for years."

"She's just checking," Elita teased. "You know she's a sucker for the rules."

Arcee snorted. "Just get the subject to the hospital, will you?"

Chromia didn't reply, but a moment later, the sound of a motorbike engine kicked in, before slowly
fading away as the blue Autobot sped to the nearest medical centre.

"Scrap!" Arcee cursed. "Forgot to ask if she picked up any more life signs."

"She would have mentioned it," Elita said idly. "She knows what her job is."

"I know, but still…"

"That was before she met Ironhide, as you very well know. He's put some sense into her,
introduced her to seriousness."

"Yeah. Guess I should trust her to know what to do."

Elita's reply was drowned out by a terrible roar as several buildings a few blocks away collapsed
under the weight of the creature. Arcee's optics narrowed. One of its smaller arms was missing.
The work of Drift, no doubt. He was a master swordsman, and could cut through anything, no
matter how big or thick.

Lowering the threshold of her audio receptors in an attempt to ignore the noises of the battle
behind her, she continued scanning, until, suddenly, she picked up a signature - no, two signals.

"Elita, I've found two humans!" she said. "Strong pulses," she frowned, looking at the area where
the lifesigns were emanating from. Bricks. More specifically, a pile of bricks. She sighed, "but
they're buried under a scrapload of bricks. Probably some other building materials too, considering
the damage. Might need your help getting them out."

"Roger that, be there in a few cycles."

Arcee didn't wait for her sister to arrive, instead digging into the pile of bricks, grabbing several in
each hand and chucking them behind her. It was a slow process, given that she wasn't allowed to
simply melt them, and it would be a mess to clean up later, but she needed to reach the humans
before they died from suffocation, immense pressure, or any other injuries they might have sustained. They could have been trapped for hours for all she knew, but it was her responsibility that they didn't remain trapped for much longer.

Two more hands joined hers, and she looked up to see Elita by her side.

"Come on, dig," the purple Autobot said. "That thing's right behind us; if we don't get these two out soon, we're all going to be crushed."

"Scrap," Arcee muttered, raising her audio threshold back to normal. The sounds of battle were even louder than before, and one quick glance over her shoulder confirmed what Elita had said. They didn't have much time.

"Can we get on to Optimus? Ask him to lure it away?"

"Lure a thing like that? Good luck trying!" Elita laughed. Arcee recognised it as her nervous laugh, the one she used when she was under pressure. Elita was just as worried as she was.

Their combined efforts meant that the pile of bricks was quickly excavated, revealing one of the humans. He was young, in his early twenties, with styled black hair, and was wearing a uniform; the logo on the breast pocket showed that the man worked for one of San Francisco's ferry services.

"Hey," Arcee said kindly.

The man turned his head slowly to look at his rescuer. His eyes widened. "Autobots?" he said, almost reverently. "You're here?"

"Sure are," Elita grinned. "Arcee and I are doing the rounds while the rest get their hands dirty."

"I don't believe it," the man muttered. "Yeye, we're gonna get out of here! It's the Autobots!"

"Not so fast. You're still trapped under a lot of bricks -"

"And a few steel girders," the man winced, looking up at them. "They're pinning us both down, otherwise we would have dug our way out before now."

"Scrap," Arcee muttered. Moving girders would take time, time they didn't have, especially since they were now directly in the middle of the creature's shadow. There was no alternative. They'd have to use their weapons.

Elita noticed her hesitation, and laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "We don't have any other option," she said. "What happened in Christchurch happened. Forget it. This is now."

Arcee just grimaced. "Close your eyes," she warned the young human as she transformed her hand in to a gun. The man looked at her confusedly for a second, but quickly clenched them shut as he realised what she was about to do.

Blam!

Arcee fired a shot into the rubble above the spot where the man's legs would be. Shrapnel flew everywhere, hitting both Cybertronians and the human.

Blam blam!

Two more shots was all it took, much to Arcee's relief, and she could see the man's legs, as well as
the dull silver of several steel girders. But still no sign of the second human.

"The person you were talking to before - where are they?"

"At my feet," the man said, inclining his head. "He says -"

"He can see your feet," Elita interrupted. "Our audio receptors are much more sensitive than your ears," she explained, seeing the man's confused expression. "And we can understand Cantonese." She turned to Arcee. "We'll have to dig him out too."

"Scrap," Arcee moaned again, "mining laser it is." Her gun hand transformed into a short, stumpy appendage with a domed light at the end.

"Min - mining laser?" the man gulped. "Won't that, uh, cut my leg off?"

"Humans," Arcee scoffed, rolling her optics. With only a moment's fired the weapon, instantly disintegrating several bricks.

"Hey, what are you doing?" the man shouted, staring up at the Autobots in alarm.

"Getting you free," Elita explained, a slightly confused. What else would they be doing?

Arcee fired off a few more shots, making quick work of the remaining bricks, and revealing both humans in their entirety. The second one was much older, with a balding head. His face was kindly, but was currently filled with fear, no doubt due to the current situation. His legs were trapped by three big girders, and he wriggled in an attempt to free himself.

"Stay still," Arcee ordered, adjusting the laser. She wasn't going to simply vaporise the girders - that would allow yet more debris to fall on the trapped men. No, she was going to cut them in specific places, allowing the humans to worm their way out. Taking careful aim, she activated the laser, splitting the steel in two instantly. She slowly worked her way down the width of the girder, until the job was complete and it fell apart.

"Get out, slowly," she said, getting to work on the second one. A few moments later, both men were free. And just in time too. An extremely loud BANG echoed across the deserted streets, and a roar of pain followed shortly after.

"Scrap, we're getting out of here," Arcee said. "Now."

They didn't waste any time transforming, instead picking up the humans and bolting back down the alley.

"Uh...what're those?" the young man asked, pointing skyward.

Arcee looked up. Several black spots were dotting the sky - and they were getting bigger.

"Flesh from the monster," she realised, just as the first globules hit the ground, accompanied by long strands of a strange blue substance.

Arcee shuddered reflexively as some of the substance hit her frame, but she continued running as fast as her servo-motors would allow. "Stop wriggling," she hissed at the young man, who was rolling around under her arm, trying to get into a better position.

"You're - ugh - squeezing me," the man replied.

"Humans," Arcee muttered again, but she did nothing until they exited the alley and moved on to a
main street. In one deft movement, she transformed, drawing a shocked cry from the human before he opened his eyes to see he was riding on the seat of a pink motorbike. Behind him, the older man was riding in the same position on a purple bike.

"Did you just transform?" The young man asked, amazed. Despite the situation, he laughed. "That was so cool!"

Suddenly, the old man cried out, and reached up to wipe some of the blue substance off his shoulders, clearly disgusted.

"What's the matter?" Elita asked. "Is he hurt?" She twitched as she felt a sizzling sensation on her frame.

"No, he just got some of the blue stuff on him," the young man explained, glancing back at the old man and wrinkling his nose. "Gross."

Suddenly, the ground shuddered, and Arcee saw a huge cloud of dust and dirt shoot into the air behind them.

"What was that?" the young man asked worriedly.

"Hold on," Elita said, opening up a link to the Autobot Emergency Response Unit channel. The channel was designed as a way of letting the people of Earth know what the Autobots were doing during an Emergency Response mission, but it also came in handy for any Transformer wanting a situation update without having to contact someone else directly.

"This is the Ratchet, addressing anyone who may be listening to this frequency. I am pleased to report that we have successfully defeated the monster ravaging San Francisco, I repeat, the monster is dead."

"You guys did it!" the younger of the humans said, almost disbelievingly. "You took it down!"

"It's our job," Arcee said, with a hint of smugness.

"Just wish we could take part," Elita added forlornly.

"What do you mean? I thought all of you Autobots helped out," the younger human said. "I've seen you on TV - you work together."

Elita wobbled uncomfortably. "We do - and we are today. It's just, well, we're on the short side. Optimus is thirty-two."

"Oh..." the man trailed off. "Must be hard."

Neither Autobot said anything out loud, but they both agreed with him. Even on Cybertron, their size had been a distinct disadvantage - most of the time. Sentinel Prime had been unwilling to let them fight it out with the bigger Decepticons, and had insisted that they be used for reconnaissance only. Optimus had been more flexible, but had still only limited them to supporting fire. Still, they had made excellent snipers, with their skills being so refined that even Silverbolt and the rest of the Aerialbots had often asked them for advice on how to get that headshot from 15 klicks.

"Arcee, Arcee!" A new comm. link was opened. It was Chromia. "Hospital's deserted, they've all evacuated, not that I blame them. I've tuned in to the emergency services - they've established an
evac point a few klicks south at the Sequoia Hospital. I'm heading there with the human I found."

"Thanks, Chromia. We've got two humans with us, so we'll meet you there in a few cycles," Arcee responded, before cutting the link. "You get that, Elita?"

"Yeah," the purple Autobot replied. "Planning a route now."

"What's happening?" the young man asked.

"Hospital's been evacuated, so we're heading to another hospital further south," Arcee explained.

At this, the old man spoke for the first time. "Hospital?" he said. "Why we go to hospital?"

"You're hurt," Arcee said. "Both of your legs have small fractures, you both have minor scratches, and are going to have bruises by this time tomorrow. And I'm no CPU expert, but I'd say you're both suffering from a minor case of shock. I scanned both of you when you we transformed."

Neither man bothered replying. They couldn't argue against evidence like that.

The flow of conversation ended soon after, and they drove in silence for the rest of the journey. They made good time on the highway, but soon reached a traffic jam, forcing the Autobots to drive on the left lane, which was completely devoid of traffic. No one was surprised. But finally, after what seemed like forever, they finally reached the Sequoia Hospital. Cars filled up the parking spaces and lined the adjacent streets, and people were gathered outside the entrances, forming long lines. Tents had been erected in open spaces, and several hospital beds had been set up under them."

"There you are!" exclaimed a blue motorbike, skidding to a halt beside them as they pulled up at the curb. "Been waiting ages."

"We came as fast as we could, Chromia," Arcee said. "You could have gone back to Optimus if you wanted."

"They'll manage without us for a bit longer. Besides, you need to know where to go. Follow me."

She revved her engine and mounted the footpath, trundling slowly over to one of the vacant hospital beds. Arcee, Elita and the two humans followed her, hoping that no one would notice two people driving motorbikes in a medical environment.

A doctor was fiddling with his instruments as the Autobots and humans approached. Arcee used her horn to get his attention, and the doctor to nearly jumped out of his skin. Once he had recovered enough, he turned to see the men smiling awkwardly back at him, while the Autobots hung back behind them.

"Um, we'd like to get some treatment please," the younger man said.

"Erm, okay," the doctor said. "Who first?"

"Yeye, you go," the young man muttered, pushing his grandfather forward. The old man walked over to the bed and lay down.

"Just a full checkup, please," the grandson said. "We were under some rubble…" he glanced at the Autobots, "so we might have some fractions. And Yeye got some blue stuff from the monster on him."
The doctor nodded and got to work.

Sighing in relief, the young man walked a few steps away before turning to the Autobots.

"You guys saved us. I can't tell you how thankful I am."

"It's what we do," Arcee said dismissively. "No need to say thanks. After eons of war, the least we can do is save lives instead of take them."

"We'd better get back to Optimus and the others," Elita added. "Plenty of other things to do before we leave. Good luck with the hospital. Hope you guys get what you need."

The man nodded. "We will, even if it takes us days."

The Autobots revved their engines, but they paused before driving off.

"Don't think we've been introduced," Arcee said. "I'm Arcee, this is Elita-One. The blue one's Chromia."

"Tendo," the man said. "Tendo Choi."

"Nice to meet you, Tendo," Chromia said.

And with that, she, Elita and Arcee accelerated, driving away from the hospital and back to San Francisco.

Chapter End Notes

 Twist number one: the Autobots saved Tendo Choi! Other than that, this chapter showcased what Arcee and her sisters do. While not properly equipped for engaging the Kaiju full on, their task of saving and evacuating survivors is equally important, and we wanted to really emphasise that they're just as good as the rest of the Autobots.
Recuperation

Chapter 4 - Recuperation

By the time Arcee and her sisters had driven back to Chinatown, the cleanup effort was already well underway. The roads in and out of the city were filled with trucks, with the outbound vehicles filled with debris. This meant that the majority of the roads could be traversed easily; they only had to transform once to get past some rubble.

Army personnel littered the streets, either clearing them of bricks and other materials, or checking buildings for bodies to recover. It was a morbid job, and Arcee knew what it felt like. She’d recovered her share of human remains from disaster zones during her time on Earth, but it didn’t compare to the sheer amount of death she’d seen on Cybertron. She never wanted to experience something like that again. None of them did.

As they drove on, they occasionally came across one of their fellow Autobots helping the humans in their cleanup tasks. Ironhide was in vehicle mode as Sideswipe piled blocks of concrete onto him; Hound was standing over the Twins, making them do some work; and Jolt, Drift and Mirage were holding up the first floor of a partially collapsed building as army men and women searched the ground level and cleared it of debris. Optimus, Ratchet and Wheeljack would be wherever the monster was defeated, but Jazz and Crosshairs should be helping the humans. They could be working somewhere else, but there was always the possibility…

‘No,’ Arcee thought fiercely. ‘No one was terminated. Optimus would have told us.’

Thankfully, she was proven right several minutes later when they finally reached the area where the monster had been killed. The two Autobots were sitting under a building’s awning, and judging by Ratchet’s presence nearby, both had been injured. From what they could see, though, the injuries weren’t severe. In fact, they couldn’t see anything wrong with them at all.

“Ratchet’s probably being paranoid as usual,” Arcee said. “Can’t see any damage on them.”

“They might have suffered internal injuries,” Elita pointed out. “Broken energon lines, or a asynchronous transfer adapter put out of alignment.”

“Strongarm always used to have some trouble with that,” Chromia chuckled. “Red Alert got so annoyed that he eventually gave him a new one.”

“Wish Red Alert would swap your vocal processor with Bumblebee’s,” Arcee muttered quietly. “Never knowing when you’d be able to speak would do you good.”

Chromia was the youngest of her sisters, and held a highly optimistic opinion of the world. There was also the fact that she didn’t always take things seriously, and she never shut up. She’d improved a lot since she met Ironhide, but in Arcee’s opinion, it would be quite a while before she was tolerable. Maybe it was Chromia’s way of coping with the millions of years of horror she’d experienced, maybe not, but it really grinded her gears.

“Autobots?” asked a guard as the three two-wheelers approached the barriers that surrounded the area. “Your boss wants to see you.”

“Thanks,” Arcee muttered. They transformed and jumped over the barrier before speeding off towards the creature’s carcass, eliciting a soft ‘wow’ from the guard. The Autobots were world
heroes, and their amazing ability to transform was well documented, but seeing it on television didn’t come close to the real deal. They were awesome!

The sisters soon found Optimus talking to a familiar person - Major William Lennox. They’d been told that Lennox had been the Captain of a group of soldiers who had worked with Optimus, Jazz, Ironhide, Ratchet and Bumblebee to defeat the Decepticons in Mission City, and had been promoted by the Secretary of Defence himself. For several years now, the Major had been the chief liaison between the Autobots and the Pentagon, and he had become a strong ally.

“The world’s oceanologists are confused about this whole mess, none of them have any idea where the thing came from,” Lennox was saying. “They’re saying it might be some sort of ancient creature that was frozen in the polar ice caps during the Ice Age, and only woke up due to global warming melting the ice caps. Doesn’t make a lot of sense to me.”

Optimus frowned. “I am sure that if a creature of such size once existed on your planet, evidence of its presence would have been found,” he said. “But I believe we may have the answer.”

Lennox was relieved. “Thank god. The Pentagon wants a full report, and I was starting to think I’d have to give them something that sounded like the plot for Ice Age Five. The media isn’t helping, either. God, this is going to be a mess.” He shook his head. “What’s your theory?”

“Ratchet detected unusual seismic activity deep beneath the Pacific Ocean several days before the creature emerged,” Optimus explained. “It stands to reason that the monster was the source of the disturbances. But why such a creature would be lurking in your planet’s depths, I do not know. Perhaps by analysing its remains, we can gain a greater understanding of its past and its behaviour.”

“Sounds better than anything I’ve heard so far,” Lennox nodded. “I’ve already got orders to move it. Don’t know how we’re going to do that, though. Probably cut it up.”

“If you need any assistance, Ratchet and Wheeljack will be on hand to help,” Optimus offered. “With your permission, I will also ask that you allow them to help your scientists analyse the creature’s remains.”

“No need to ask, Optimus. That’ll be fine.”

“Better clear it with your superiors first,” Arcee interrupted, zooming up beside Optimus. “They might not be happy with you making decisions for them.”

“Most of the government’s always happy for you guys to help,” Lennox said. “It’s the Pentagon you need to be worried about. The high-ups kept ordering the pilots to fly up close to the thing before you got here. Thought it would be more effective. Idiots.”

“We saw,” Elita said drily. “We weren’t impressed.”

“They were planning to nuke the monster too, if it wasn’t taken down after a few hours,” Lennox sighed, “and I’m not convinced they’d wait until you were clear.” He shook his head. “I dunno. After six years, you’d think they’d trust you.”

“Military organisations cannot afford to trust,” Optimus said sadly. “That is true no matter what the species. But rest assured, Major, your government can always rely on us to stand in defense of your people, not matter how great the threat.”

“I’ll pass the message along, but I don’t expect they’ll listen,” Lennox said, just as his earpiece beeped. “Excuse me, I’ll have to take this.”
With the conversation over, Optimus turned to Arcee and her sisters. “Arcee, how did your mission go?” he asked.

“Rescued three humans, evacuated them to hospital,” Arcee reported. “They should be fine.”

“On of the humans got some blue lubricant on him,” Elita said, “but it didn’t seem to bother him. It stung when I got some on my frame, though.”

“Probably just the monster’s blood,” Chromia cut in, shrugging. “It’s organic, so what else would it be?”

“Whilst you are probably correct, Chromia, it doesn’t hurt to check. I too felt a stinging sensation, and the others reported it as well. As a result, I gave a sample for Wheeljack to analyse.”

“You’ll be lucky if it doesn’t blow up,” Elita muttered quietly.

Privately, Arcee agreed. Wheeljack was as much a scientist as she was a Wrecker - nothing like one. If she wanted a scientist, she’d call Perceptor. Unfortunately, she hadn’t seen him since she left Cybertron, and wasn’t likely to see him again. For some reason, he’d chosen to stay behind on the dying planet along with a few others. Why he’d made that decision was a mystery that was unlikely to ever be solved.

“Ah, Prime,” Wheeljack called, noticing their approach. “No luck so far, I’m afraid. My inbuilt scanners aren’t built for this type of work. I need my equipment back at my lab, or at least some of the humans’ more advanced tools.”

Optimus frowned. “Have you asked Ratchet for help? I recall that he recently upgraded his scanners to better analyse organic components.”

“I did, but he said I’d have to wait. He’s using the opportunity to give Jazz a thorough medical checkup.”

“Now that I have to see,” Chromia said, grinning. “Where are they?”


“Crosshairs won’t let him get too serious,” Arcee said, as she and her sisters began rolling slowly in the direction Wheeljack had pointed. “We’ll tell Ratchet you’ve ordered him to stay and help.” she said to Optimus.

“Thank you, Arcee,” the Autobot leader said, and the sisters zoomed off. “Wheeljack, I also ask that you stay here and help the humans. They will need all the help you can get.”

“But I told you, I need my tools -”

“The Wreckers will bring your equipment when they land in a few hours’ time. In the meantime, I ask that you determine how best to transport the creature to a more viable location. The humans want it out of the way as soon as possible to allow the reconstruction process to begin.”

Wheeljack sighed. “I’ll go have a look and see how best to cut it up,” he said, and he plodded off towards the monster’s dead body. Even in death it dominated the landscape, with its body casting a large shadow over the surrounding area.

“Optimus, sir!”
Optimus looked down; an army officer was standing at his feet, a note of some sort in hand.

“Yes?” Optimus asked.

“The media’s wondering when you’re going to do your interview. They’re saying they can’t wait the usual thirty-six hours because it’s ‘too much in the public interest’,” the officer said.

“Tell the media that the rule still stands,” Optimus said. “It might even take a little longer before I have the time. I understand that the public wants to know exactly what happened, but for now, the biggest focus is the recovery effort. I shall let them know when I am ready.”

“Err, right. I’ll tell them no, for now. Thanks!” the officer said, before running off.

Optimus watched her go with a small tinge of annoyance. The Autobots were extremely popular with the media, and were roped into doing interviews with them after every mission - at the very least. In most cases, the media already knew most details about the disaster the Autobots had responded to, and just wanted an excuse to get an ‘exclusive’ report on whichever Autobot was trending at the time. Most of the Autobots despised the media and resented the interviews, but accepted them as part of the life on Earth. Optimus didn’t particularly like them either, but he recognised their importance in building trust between the two species. By sharing some details about life on Cybertron and the war with the Decepticons, he had demonstrated that he was willing to trust humanity with sensitive information. In return, the humans had allowed them to share their planet, trusting them with their infrastructure and resources. Though the media didn’t realise it, they had helped forge a great friendship between two species. It was Optimus’ intention that this friendship would only be strengthened over time as the Autobots responded to disasters of any kind, helping humanity wherever they could. Today had just been another example of that co-operation.

“Optimus,” Ironhide called over the comm. link. “Bumblebee’s just arrived; he’s heading your way.”

“Thank you Ironhide, I will meet with him shortly.”

After the events at Mission City, Bumblebee had decided to stay with the human boy, Sam. This had lead him to Chicago, where Sam now lived. The yellow Autobot had no doubt heard about the monster’s attack on San Francisco and rushed to help.

Sure enough, several minutes later, Bumblebee came zooming around the corner, before transforming, jumping over the barriers and landing on two feet in front of Optimus.

“Sorry I’m late, Optimus. I came as fast as I could,” the yellow Autobot said. “Is there any way I can help?”

“Well met, Bumblebee. For the moment, I ask that you focus on helping the humans clean up.” Optimus said, giving Bumblebee a small smile. “There are still a lot of debris to clear of the roads. I imagine we will be here for quite some time.”

Bumblebee sighed, disappointed. He’d hoped to get back to Sam in Chicago as soon as possible. Nevertheless, he recognized the importance of the job, and it wasn’t like Sam couldn’t survive without him for a while. “Yes sir.”

He walked off, using his sensors to detect energon sources in order to locate his fellow Autobots. At least he’d be able to catch up with them. Life with Sam prevented him from seeing them regularly. Still, it was a minor cost, and he’d much rather protect the human boy than do anything
After a week and a half of near-constant work, the cleanup effort was all but completed. The streets were cleared, and only a few buildings were left on the demolition list. The work had been sped up considerably by the arrival of the Wreckers, who had taken a great delight in blowing up buildings that had been damaged beyond repair. Under the watchful optics of Ratchet and Wheeljack, the creature’s remains had been cut up and moved to a research facility in the central United States. Most of it had been frozen for research purposes, but the rest had been incinerated; there simply hadn’t been enough storage space! The skull had been kept wholly intact, though, and was in stored while waiting to be installed in a memorial to the attack. Construction was set to begin construction in a few weeks, and the media was buzzing about its unveiling, but for the mean time, they had another ‘exclusive’ to feast on.

After days of holding the media at bay, Optimus had finally consented to an interview. But in typical media fashion, it wasn’t going to be a one-on-one. Instead, the company running the interview had conducted a lottery, allowing members of the public to attend the session. It was essentially a chat show - apart from the fact that it was open air and on location in the Presidio of San Francisco.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the host, David, boomed, “as I’m sure you all know, about a week and a half ago, we witnessed one of the most astounding events to have occurred in the twenty-first century so far. A giant monster emerged from beneath San Francisco Bay and attacked the city, destroying countless buildings and killing many people. Thankfully, with the help of the Autobots, the monster was quickly defeated. And now, ladies and gentlemen, in a television exclusive, I will speak live to the Autobot leader himself, who has graciously allowed us some of his limited time. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you: Optimus Prime!”

Cheers erupted from the crowd as spotlights swung to light up Optimus, who was standing patiently next to the raised platform the host was standing on.

“Optimus, it’s great to have you on.”

“My pleasure, David,” Optimus replied.

“Now, I’m sure that everyone here remembers their reaction to, um, what are they calling it, the Kaiju? The Kaiju’s emergence from San Francisco Bay. I know what mine was - my jaw hit the floor! But what was yours? Had you encountered anything like it before?”

“Cybertronians come in a variety of different shapes and sizes,” Optimus explained. “One of the largest Cybertronians to ever exist was a Decepticon by the name of Trypticon. His size is comparable to the creature we defeated. It took half the Autobot army to take him down, at the cost of many lives.”

“Wow,” … David softly. “But if it took half or your army to take down this Trypticon, why were you able to take on our monster and defeat it with so few of you?”

Optimus paused thoughtfully before replying. “We had the element of surprise. I do not believe it was expecting to encounter any resistance like us. Our agility and the effectiveness of our weapons were not something it was counting on.”
“True, true - but for two Autobots, speed and agility wasn’t enough, was it? Mirage nearly got crushed, and Jazz had a nasty fall. We all know that Jazz has been dead before, but what was your reaction when he landed on that building? Were you worried that you’d have to mourn for him again?”

“No,” Optimus said immediately. “We have all survived worse injuries. Jazz was not in immediate harm.”

“Even though the monster nearly crushed him?”

“Jazz and Crosshairs were partners on Cybertron - they always look out for each other. I trusted Crosshairs not to let his friend come to any harm.”

“Good for you...if only our government trusted us enough not to spy on us,” David said, rolling his eyes and eliciting a chorus of laughter from the audience. “Just joking, don’t worry!” he grinned. “Now, Optimus,” David continued, lowering his voice, making it softer. “Everyone here knows that the Autobots have been at war for millions of years. We know that, for the past six, you have found peace here on Earth. What was it like fighting once more? What were you feeling when you finally killed the monster?”

Here, Optimus paused again.

“I do not revel in fighting,” He started. “But the War has lingered in my mind for millions of years. I have known peace for the past five years, but so short a time cannot erase countless aeons of fighting. When this ‘Kaiju’ came, it was much like a return to the time of War. An opponent who sought to destroy us and our allies, to tear down what we had built up. I do not enjoy taking the life of another living being, but I will not deny the satisfaction of having defended our own.”

“Wow,” David said. “Wow. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the true wisdom of a leader.”

The audience clapped politely.

“Now,” David continued as the camera zoomed in on his face, “unfortunately, Optimus is still quite busy, and so we cannot continue this interview for much longer. But before we close: a rare opportunity. Before the show began, we asked members of the audience to submit questions they’d like Optimus Prime to answer. We’ve selected the ones we liked the most. First, from Fred: ‘Did you guys have any car races on Cybertron, and if so, what were they like?’”

“We had races, certainly,” Optimus replied, “but they were unofficial and mostly made up on the spot by Autobots who were bored on missions. I believe the Decepticons also participated in similar events, but I cannot give you any more detail than that.”

“Not to worry, I’m sure we all understand. But bored Autobots racing? I’m sure we can all relate to that!” David chuckled. “Next question from Jackie, and this is a weird one: ‘can you alter your robot modes so that you’re wearing clothes? I think Jazz would look hot in a tux!’ What do you say to that?”

Optimus frowned. This was exactly the type of question that made the media unpopular with the Autobots. “We can...imitate your human coverings,” he said. “I believe that Crosshairs has what you would call ‘glasses’ and a ‘coat’. But that is the extent of our abilities. If we were to mimic any human fabrics, they would be, and look like, parts of us.”

David smiled. “Well, I’m sure we’d all like to see you dressed up, but please, stay away from some areas of our fashion industry! Some things are not meant to be worn by giant metal robots! Now,
the next question is from a lovely lady called Alison: ‘What was life like before the war?’ Well, I think that question’s been answered before...Optimus, would you like to reaffirm your answer?”

Optimus paused for a moment, just long enough to recall memories of older, happier times, before speaking again. “As I have said previously, the answer to that question has many answers. The war did not begin overnight, but slowly built up over millions of years. There is not enough time for me to explain in detail, but life on Cybertron before the start of the war was...best described as peaceful. Cybertron’s golden age was a time of exploration and friendship, but like all good things, eventually came to an end.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” David said. “But thank you for sharing!”

The crowd was subdued in its applause, respecting the fact that their insight into Cybertron’s past was a rare privilege. The Autobots didn’t like to discuss it, and the subject was rarely raised as a result.

“Now, for our final question...I think we’ve chosen the best for last: ‘could you please transform and roll out?’”

Optimus had already taken a few steps back from the platform in anticipation of the request - it was always asked at the end of an interview. This one he didn’t particularly mind.

Without saying a word, he initiated his transformation. The crowd gasped in amazement as pieces folded out and rearranged themselves into different shapes. They watched in awe as, where Optimus had stood only a few seconds ago, a long-nose truck was now parked, it’s red and blue colour scheme shining under the surrounding spotlights.

“No matter how many time we see it, it’s still amazing,” David shouted over the audience’s roars of approval. “That’s all from San Francisco tonight, but don’t forget the planned memorial service in December, to be attended by the President. More information on that as we hear it. But for now, goodbye!”

As the crowd applauded, the credits rolled and the cameras shut down, the citizens of the world finally began putting the attack behind them. They once again turned to the future, a bright and prosperous future filled with mankind’s success thanks to the Autobots. Little did they know that the San Francisco attack was to have consequences much greater than any had predicted. The battle had not been won - it was just getting started.
"Gah, humans," Crosshairs muttered, jumping down off the service elevator before it finished descending. "Can't even go outside before they start criticising your looks. Apparently my coat isn't 'robotic' enough. I'm sick and tired of that talk, they've been going on about it ever since I got on this rock. Next human who says anything about my lovely trench coat's getting a blastin'."

"That's what you said last time," Drift said unconcernedly, not even bothering to look up from Teletraan's main console. "And the time before that, and a couple of weeks before that…"

It was February 2014, six months after the San Francisco attack, which was now all but forgotten. The city had been rebuilt, its inhabitants had moved back in, and the memorial was almost complete. Humanity had moved on, and the Autobots with them. Their disaster response activities had quickly resumed, and at present only Drift, Crosshairs, Sideswipe and Wheeljack were at the base; the rest were on various missions all over the world.

"If I keep sayin' it, it'll come true one day," Crosshairs shrugged. "If Optimus didn't have his 'no injuring humans' rule, then -"

"Then we'd be no better than the Decepticons," Drift said sharply.

Crosshairs laughed. "Like you can talk, Deadlock," he said, nudging Drift with his shoulder.

Drift's optics narrowed. "I turned from that path many cycles ago, Crosshairs. I chose the path of honour. Now, I think Teletraan's detected something." He pushed past the green Autobot and frowned at the hologram of the planet that was projected in the middle of the room.

'Tropical storm detected. Projected path takes it through the Philippines. Action required,'

Teletraan declared.

Drift and Crosshairs glanced at each other.

"Oh no," Crosshairs said quickly, seeing the look on Drift's face. "You ain't getting me over there, not when the boss and a few others are in Indonesia. They can deal with it; by the time we get there, it'll be too late. No need for us to go wastin' our time."

"Judging by the strength of this storm, our help would not go amiss. It is one of the largest I've seen for a while," Drift pointed out.

Crosshairs sighed. "Just give the boss a call and see where he is. If he's left Indonesia, send him further north, if not, we'll all go. Happy?"

"Not particularly," Drift replied. "Teletraan, get me a link to Optimus Prime."

A few beeps and whirs later, a comm. channel had been opened.

"Drift, what's the matter?" The Autobot leader's voice boomed over Teletraan's speakers.

"Sensei, we have a tropical storm fast approaching the Philippines. It would take us too long to get there, so -"
"You are wondering if I and the others could make it time?" Optimus asked. "Hopefully. We departed Medan airport about an hour ago; we should be able to make a detour north. How fast is the storm moving?"

"Very rapidly," Drift replied, glancing at Teletraan's data. "You may just catch the end of the storm."

"Good, that will still allow us to conduct our usual recovery operations. I think myself and the others should be able to handle this. You, Crosshairs, Sideswipe and Wheeljack can remain at the base for the time being. If we need backup, I'll contact the Wreckers and Elita-One."

"Understood, Sensei. Drift out."

Teletraan terminated the link.

"Told ya so," Crosshairs said, a satisfied grin splattered on his face. "We don't have to budge an inch."

"Crosshairs sits still now, not liking to move at all, he's happy at home," Drift recited serenely.

Crosshairs rolled his optics. "That was the worst haiku thing I've ever heard you say."

"That's because I made it up on the spot. I usually rely on the humans to provide examples. They are much more artistic, with a taste for language that I shall never have."

"Whoa, hold it right there, Drifty! Any more and you'll end up going full Beachcomber on us!"

Drift frowned. "I don't believe I've met him…"

Crosshairs laughed and put an arm over Drift's shoulder. "Believe me, that's a good thing. He was crazy like you wouldn't believe."

"I think I could believe all right," Drift said innocently, casually glancing at Crosshairs.

"Me? Yeah, you got me there I suppose. I can be a little crazy."

Twelve kilometres above sea level, the pilots of the C-17 transporting the Autobots from Indonesia were settling in for the long flight back to the USA.

"I've said it before, and I've said it again," the pilot sighed. "But I don't see why we had to leave late in the day."

"Optimus doesn't like being away from Washington for too long," the co-pilot explained. "Probably worries about the ones he leaves in charge."

"That clever 'Bot, the techie, doesn't seem to bad. It's the pickup truck one - Ironhide - that I worry about. He looks like he could do some serious damage."

"They all could, dude. They're robots from outer space."

A green light began flashing on the instrument panel.

"Speaking of the Autobots," the pilot said, flicking a switch near a speaker grille. "Yes, Optimus, what's the matter?"
"I am afraid we will have to make a detour, pilot. Autobot Command has just informed me of a strong tropical storm in the Philippines. It is likely that we will be needed to speed up the recovery process," the Autobot leader said.

The pilot inwardly grimaced. Just what they needed, more time away from home. Out loud though, he said, "That shouldn't be a problem, sir, we'll change course right away."

"Hope the Liaison unit cleared a flight path," the co-pilot muttered as they both banked the aircraft slightly to the left before levelling out.

"We'll get it in a few minutes; this isn't the first time this sort of thing's happened. Disasters don't happen on schedule, you know."

"Sometimes I wish they did," replied the co-pilot as they flew the plane on into the dark night.

The next few hours passed without activity; the Autobots enjoying the chance to relax after several days of hard work in Indonesia. But before the very first rays of the sun had even begun to shimmer at the edge of the horizon, Optimus was roused out of his restful state by a comm. link call from Teletraan.

"Alert, alert, Philippines situation critical. Large-scale Organic Lifeform similar to Organism: Axehead detected," the computer intoned.

"Similar to Axehead? The creature in San Francisco?" Optimus asked, alarmed.

"Affirmative."

A hundred questions whirred in Optimus' cognitive processors. Where had the creature come from? Why hadn't Teletraan detected it before now? Only one thing he did know: they had to reach the Philippines as soon as possible.

"Teletraan, send the coordinates to the pilots of this aircraft. Then, calculate how long it will take us to reach those coordinates."


Optimus inwardly groaned. The damage the creature could do in that time was unthinkable, and would most certainly be worse than in San Francisco. The first creature had been distracted by military jets before the Autobots arrived, allowing damage to be kept to a minimum, but here...would it even be worth it? It took the combined efforts of most of his Autobots to defeat the first creature, but this time they numbered only five. Even then, only he, Mirage and possibly Ratchet would stand any chance of giving the monster significant injuries. But would that be enough to take it down?

"Teletraan," Optimus said finally. "Let the Filipino government know that we will be unable to help for quite some time. I also think it likely that we will require backup once the immediate crisis is over; send a message to all Autobot teams directing them to the Philippines when their current missions are complete."

"Affirmative, Optimus Prime," Teletraan said, and terminated the link.

"Bad news?" Ratchet asked.

"You know me well, old friend," Optimus said, his truck mode emitting a sad creak. He broadened
the range of his comm. channel, allowing Mirage, Arcee and Chromia to listen in as well. "Another monster similar to the one in San Francisco has been detected near Manila."

"What!" Arcee revved her engine in shock. "Another one?"

"Of course," Mirage muttered gloomily. "There can never be one."

Ratchet was more reserved. "We're too far away..." he realised.

"Yes," Optimus confirmed, his voice tinged with regret. "Due to our distance from the city, we will be unable to reach the monster before it does considerable damage. As such, I have instructed Teletraan to alert the humans to this fact, allowing them to make any decisions they deem necessary."

"Something extreme, no doubt," Mirage said. "I won't be surprised if there's nothing left by the time we get there."

"I will be," Ratchet said amusedly. "Based on my analysis of the San Francisco monster's cadaver, only a large amount of focused energy would be able to damage the creature's skin. To destroy the beast completely would require nothing short of an extremely powerful nuclear device, one that would easily wipe out the city as well. I don't think the humans would be that desperate to use such a weapon."

"See, Mirage?" Chromia said. "No need to be so pessimistic about everything."

Mirage just grunted.

"Since we've decided that there will be a monster by the time we get there," Arcee said quickly, before Mirage think of a snarky retort. "What do you think the humans will do to stop it? Optimus?"

"Try and divert it away from the most heavily populated areas," the Autobot leader replied. "If that doesn't work, then they will most likely try and defeat it themselves - without us."

"Come on," Arcee scoffed. "They'll leave it for us, that's for sure. That's all humans do these days; if they know we're close, it's our responsibility."

"You're being a bit unfair, 'Cee," Chromia chided. "Most of the time we're too far away to be particularly helpful, like today."

"Only one way to find out, I suppose," Arcee huffed. "We wait."

And wait they did, somewhat impatiently, as the plane flew on into the early hours of the morning, heading north east as the first signs of dawn began to show. Now that their routine recovery mission had been turned on its head, the Autobots were restless. Arcee, Chromia and Mirage started their engines, revving them periodically, itching to get off the plane and see what they would be facing. Optimus and Ratchet were more reserved, though the others could tell that they were equally nervous with anticipation.

But then - for a split second - an exceptionally bright flash of light shone briefly through the cracks in the fuselage.

"Hey, did you guys see that?" the pilot asked over the aircraft's PA system. "Nearly bloody blinded me!"
"We saw it, Captain," Optimus replied. "Do you have any idea what may have caused it?"

"Well, it came from where we're headed; so a bomb, maybe? There is another Godzilla down there after all," the pilot answered. "Whatever the reason, I'm just glad you're the ones going down there, not me. You take the drop in about half an hour."

"That's too long," Arcee muttered as soon as the pilot turned off his microphone. "We should have been there before now."

Though no one said anything, they all privately agreed. Earth air transportation was too slow, even with the improvements that Wheeljack had made to their fleet of C-17s. All too often they wished they had access to their spaceship, the Xantium, which was currently stored in the Kennedy Space Centre. Unfortunately, that would not be the case today, and they'd have to wait for that half hour to pass, hoping to Primus that the humans hadn't resorted to using the only weapons Ratchet predicted would kill the monster - nuclear ones. But as the minutes ticked by with no further flashes of light, it became increasingly likely that they had.

Eventually, though, with the whir of machinery, the loading ramp of the plane began to lower.

"You're clear for the drop, Autobots," the pilot said. "Good luck."

All five Autobots revved their engines and drove out of the plane. A thick cloud layer masked the ground from view; the only remainder of the tropical storm that they had initially responded too. As one, they transformed, and quickly reached terminal velocity, contrails forming behind their limbs.

"Autobots, prepare to engage," Optimus ordered.

"If there's anything to engage," Mirage said.

"There will be," Chromia said, her optics narrowing with fierce determination. "There's got to be. Humans aren't that stupid or callous."

"Only one way to find out," Arcee said, as they plunged into the seething mass of condensed water vapour. There was zero visibility for a few moments, and then they were through, Manila's metropolis sprawling across the ground below.

"We've got landing beacons," Mirage said drily, noting the columns of smoke billowing up from the city.

"Is the creature active?" Optimus asked.

Mirage scanned the ground below, looking for any sign that the creature was alive. It didn't take him long to discover that it wasn't. The creature had left a zigzagging trail of destruction throughout Manila, ending where the bomb had created an ugly scar against the otherwise gleaming city - a large area encompassing the ruins of dozens of buildings, an area in which the monster's corpse lay, defeated.

"No," Mirage reported, somewhat satisfied. The humans had killed the creature, just as he had predicted.

There was a brief silence as the rest of the Autobots reacted to the news. Eventually, Optimus spoke once more.

"Thank you, Mirage," he said sadly. "It seems that fate was not with us today. But do not let this
interrupt in our efforts to recover all survivors from the incident. We have a job to do."

And with that remark, the Autobot leader deployed his parachute, and the others quickly followed suit.

"Head for the creature's corpse," Ratchet instructed. "The humans with most need of medical attention will be closer to it and the epicentre of the explosion."

Steering their parachutes in the creature's direction, the Autobots could see humans crawling frantically over the rubble below, no doubt in an effort to see the extent of the damage, as well as confirmation that the monster was dead, and to discover if their friends or family were still alive.

"What they think they're doing?" Ratchet cried out in alarm. "The bomb used was almost certainly nuclear - the fallout will irradiate them!"

Arcee wasted no time, quickly amplifying her speakers. "Attention humans, this area is highly irradiated! I'd advise you get the scrap out of there before your health gets damaged any further!" she boomed in Filipino.

The humans on the ground looked up, startled, before pointing excitedly at the Autobots, recognising them.

"Yes, we're the Autobots!" Arcee growled. "Get out of the irradiated area now!"

It was clear that most of the humans had got the message; they were hurriedly scrambling back over the rubble away from the monster's body, beckoning for their friends to do the same.

Ratchet visibly relaxed.

"Although they can be stupid, you can't blame them for being worried about their friends," Chromia said. "We've done the same."

"I'd be happier if they took more care with their own safety," Ratchet said. "The situation here doesn't look good; we don't need more humans dropping dead on us."

"That's enough, Ratchet, we all understand," Optimus interrupted, before transforming his hands into energon hooks, cutting his parachute cords and falling the short distance to the ground. The other Autobots quickly joined him.

"Ugh," Arcee said, reverting back to English. "I'm going to have to shut off my olfactory sensors."

"Smelt worse," Mirage said. "The smelting pits in Kaon…" He shuddered, quickly dismissing the memory from his mind.

Optimus and Ratchet ignored the others' comments and focused on the creature. It was considerably smaller than the one in San Francisco, but looked equally intimidating, or it would have before it was bombed. All of its head and most of its neck was missing, presumably having been disintegrated by the bomb, but the rest of the body seemed relatively free of wounds, though it was evident that the decomposition process had already begun.

"It seems that we were lucky that only one bomb was needed," Optimus commented.

"Indeed," Ratchet agreed. "This one seems to be physically weaker than the one in San Francisco. Almost as if it was designed to be more agile." He frowned. "The smell would indicate that it is decomposing a lot faster as well. Axehead decayed rapidly for a creature of its size, but this was
killed very recently. It shouldn't start decomposing for several days at the least."

"I'm just glad that they did kill it," Mirage pointed out. "Saved us from having to do our job."

"At the cost of thousands of innocent lives!" Arcee snapped. "We're going to be here for months sorting out this mess!"

"Then we should get started, shouldn't we?" Chromia said, shifting into her search and rescue mode. "Ratchet, where should we start looking?"

"Hmm..." the medic responded, scanning the surrounding area. "All life signs are more than one hundred and eighty metres from our position, under large amounts of rubble."

"In that case," Optimus said, "we will need to work quickly to get the injured humans to hospital. Arcee and Chromia, work with Ratchet to free the humans from the debris. Mirage and I will clear a path for Ratchet so he can drive them to the nearest medical facility."

"We're on it!" Chromia said, and she, Arcee and Ratchet ran swiftly over the rubble, heading towards the nearest life sign. "Scrap, she's two metres under."

"Hands or laser?" Arcee asked Ratchet.

"Laser," the Autobot medic advised. "We don't have enough time."

Arcee's right hand transformed into her mining laser, and a second later, the nearest lump of concrete was disintegrated. After a couple more bursts of energy, the first human was revealed.

"Primus," Arcee breathed. "She's critical."

"Third degree burns and damage from the rubble, not to mention radiation poisoning," Ratchet said as Chromia gingerly extracted the human from the debris and handed her to him. One side of the human's body had been scalded beyond belief; the skin along the right leg was completely burnt away, leaving the femur visible. Holding her in his right hand, Ratchet carefully transformed one of the fingers on his left hand into a small syringe and injected its contents into the woman.

"Still got some of them left?" Arcee asked. "Thought you ran out in Indonesia."

"I always carry spares," Ratchet explained. "Now let the nanobots do their job, just keep searching!"

Arcee and Chromia hurried over to the next lifesign, while Ratchet transformed into his vehicle mode, making sure the injured woman ended up on one of his in-built stretchers in the rear compartment. The nanobots would ensure she'd survive long enough to make it to hospital, preserving her vital organs and systems until proper medical attention could be received, so the least he could do was to make her comfortable.

All too quickly, the rear of Ratchet's vehicle mode was full, and the Autobot started his engine. "Prime, I've got a full load," he called over their comm. channel. Have you cleared a path?"

"Affirmative, Ratchet, you should be able to reach an open road quite easily," Optimus replied. "Head for the nearest hospital and ensure the humans get immediate treatment. Please ask the staff there to send emergency vehicles to help us transport the wounded as well."

"Yes, Prime," Ratchet said, and he drove smoothly away, driving through the path Optimus and Mirage had cleared before hitting the open road and rapidly accelerating away.
"This is going to be a long day," Mirage commented, watching Ratchet receding form.

"So it seems, Mirage," Optimus said somberly. 'Now, let's get to work."

Over the next few hours, the recovery effort began in earnest. Ratchet and Optimus, with the help of Filipino ambulances, ferried the injured to hospital. The rest of the Autobots worked to clear the rubble from the irradiated areas, but, with their all-clear, Filipino citizens began working to clear the rubble from buildings the creature had destroyed before being bombed. It was a morbid job for both parties, with dead bodies unearthed regularly amongst the severely injured survivors.

Hours turned into days, and soon trucks arrived to carry the rubble away; queuing up for miles in some areas. The Filipino army bolstered the recovery effort considerably, as did the arrival of Crosshairs, Sideswipe and Drift from Autobot Command. Very quickly, all hospitals in the greater Manila area were full to capacity, causing small medical facilities to be set up to accommodate those with relatively minor injuries. Unfortunately, the death toll from the disaster continued to rise, as radiation poisoning played its part, striking down thousands after the initial blast. The number succumbing to the condition was so severe that Ratchet began working on a treatment for it, hoping to make it easily synthesizable in time to save the majority of people who had received fatal doses. He was working against the clock, even with the patients injected with nanobots, but as the Autobots knew from millennia of experience, he was at his best when working under pressure.

Unfortunately, though, on this occasion, an effective treatment could not be developed quickly enough.

"It works, to an extent," Ratchet admitted to Optimus a couple of weeks later. "It delays the effects, giving the patient several more weeks to live. Beyond that though, it does nothing." He stared mournfully off into the distance, taking in the sight of Manila's damaged skyline.

"Great discoveries are not made in short amounts of time, old friend," Optimus said, placing a hand on Ratchet's shoulder. "You have given the humans more time with their loved ones. That is what counts the most."

"I should be able to save them," Ratchet replied sadly. "I'm a medic."

"Not everyone can be saved. You most of all should know that."

"Optimus, Ratchet!" William Lennox called out, approaching the two Autobots. He and several members of his Liaison Team had arrived in the Philippines with Sideswipe and co., and he'd quickly begun organising the human side of the recovery effort.

"I know, Prime, but that doesn't mean I'm happy with it," Ratchet said, as he and Optimus turned to face the Major.

Optimus gave Ratchet a comforting smile before addressing Lennox. "Yes, Major Lennox?" he asked.

"Just delivered your serum, Ratchet," Lennox said. "They were very relieved to finally have it."

Ratchet just grimaced.

"What news of the creature's excrement?" Optimus said quickly, noticing his friend's discomfort.

"Finally managed to get some local farmers to agree to use it on their farms," Lennox answered. "It was a lot harder than we thought it was going to be. Some of them thought it would bring luck bad
luck to their farms."

"Human superstitions," Ratchet said distastefully. "The excrement contains high amounts of phosphorus and will make a good fertilizer for their organic crops."

"Well, at least that's one good thing to come out of this mess," Lennox muttered. "Billions of dollars in property destruction and other costs, a toxic, decaying monster in the middle of the city that they can't get rid of for another week, over thirty-thousand dead, thousands more injured….if only you guys could have arrived sooner."

"Fate was not with us on that day, Major," Optimus said. "And while this disaster is undoubtedly a blemish on our record, it highlights the necessity for us to have access to considerably faster methods of transportation."

"Did you ever invent teleportation?" Lennox asked hopefully.

Ratchet nodded. "At some point, yes. Several Seekers were equipped with a Transwarp device which enabled short range teleportation at the expense of using a fair amount of their energon reserves. None of us knew how they had the technology, but scientists on both sides had been attempting to replicate it, often without success."

"In any case," Optimus added. "We never utilised a teleportation system on a large scale. Spacebridge's were the Ancients' methods of transportation, but the technology was lost eons ago, meaning that during the War we relied only on road, rail, air and space travel."

"So you got nothing?" Lennox said.

"I seem to remember that Perceptor was interested in the old spacebridge technology, and had been working on recreating it for ground-use only," Ratchet said thoughtfully. "But he disappeared after an attack on his lab, along with all his research."

"Dammit," Lennox muttered. "If you can't help, can we? Is there anything we can do? Better planes? Faster warning systems? There's gotta be something!"

"Current human engineering can only do so much" Optimus said. "It is unlikely anything you build will be able to achieve the speeds we need for some time. However…," he continued, looking at Ratchet, "it may be possible to build something ourselves."

"Hmm...I suppose Jolt, Wheeljack and I could design something from scratch," Ratchet mused. "The energon farms have yielded a small surplus. If we dedicate that to a new project, start work now and continue uninterrupted, we could have a prototype design in a few weeks."

"I'm afraid that will have to wait, old friend," Optimus sighed. "We need you to stay here and take care of the wounded. I will ask Wheeljack to begin working on it in the meantime, but our priority is to help the Philippines recover as soon as possible."

"Is that even going to happen?" Lennox asked incredulously. "It's going to take years to clean up this mess completely, and then you've got the political side of things to deal with. The guy who ordered the monster to be nuked is in deep shit right now."

"Human politics do not concern us," Optimus said firmly. "Our duty is to the people, not the elite few who see fit to set themselves up above the rest."

"Makes a great change from the rest of the world," Lennox grumbled. "C'mon, the Wreckers and Elita are due in at the airport in an hour. We better rendezvous with them."
T’was in the town of Griffin; the year was Eighty-Three. It was there an old cow puncher stepped up and said to me...

The lyrics to the Johnny Cash song echoed out across the desert, interrupting the silence that otherwise permeated across the landscape. A silver pontiac solstice drove down the dirt road, churning up a dust cloud that covered the five other vehicles behind it.

“How do you do, young fellow, and how would you like to go,” Jazz sang heartily, swaying in time with the song’s beat, “and spend a pleasant summer, out in New Mexico?”

The red NASCAR racer driving behind him groaned.

“It will only be pleasant if you stop singing,” Leadfoot said. “Please stop.”

“We’re nearly there,” Jolt interrupted tiredly. “Let him keep going.”

Jazz dutifully obliged. “I’ll furnish you good wages, your transportation too; if you will but go with me, one summer season through…”

“Why’d ya say that, Jolt?” Leadfoot asked crossly. “It’s all right for you, down at the back. I’m right behind the bugger!”

“He’s bored,” Jolt replied. “None of us are used to using our wheels for long distance travel.”

“...then I’ll furnish you no horses, from the hills of Mexico…”

“He’s been singing since we crossed the border!” Roadbuster cried. “You can nae call that bored!”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” a female voice called over their comm. link. “If you’re sick of him singing, turn your ears off!”

“Hmph,” said Leadfoot, before he and Roadbuster promptly did just that.

Jazz immediately stopped his singing. “Thanks for getting them two to shut up,” he said smugly. “They always try and ruin the fun.”

“The only fun you get is by driving your friends insane,” the voice pointed out. “So...you going to start singing again?”

“Heheh, nope,” Jazz laughed. “I was just waiting until they turned their auditory sensors off.”

The voice sighed. “Damn, Jazz, am I ever going to not play right into your hands?”

“Not a chance, Courtney, not a chance…”

Back In the truck behind Topspin, Lieutenant Courtney Gallant laughed. “One day, Jazz, one day. Now, get serious; we’re almost at the Farm.”

Energon Farms were the source of the Autobot’s fuel on Earth. In the year after they had first arrived on Earth, the United States Government had agreed to allow one such farm to be constructed in Nevada, several miles from the town of Jasper. The farm, encompassing a diameter
of ten kilometres, had provided enough energon for the initial number of Autobots and their related activities. Now, however, as the people of Earth slowly began to appreciate energon’s value as an alternative fuel source, and the Autobot’s own need of it began to increase, the Government saw reason to allow the Autobots to construct a second farm, providing that some of the energon it supplied would available for human use. That’s where Jolt, the Wreckers, Jazz were headed - to the construction site in the New Mexican part of the Chihuahuan Desert. Courtney was transporting the farm’s seed, a piece of crystalline energon that, once planted, would eventually grow out across the farm’s area.

They drove on in silence for several more minutes, before the Farm’s perimeter wall came into view. As they approached, an entrance formed in the wall, allowing them entry to the main site. Jolt scanned the surrounding area as they drove through, noting the energon canisters clustered together at the base of the wall, ensuring the wall had a steady energy supply to continue its slow growth to its maximum size. Everything was proceeding according to schedule.

In the distance, the foundations of the central refinery tower could be made out, shimmering in the desert heat. It was there that the convoy was headed.

By the time they reached the base of the tower, however, it was already bustling with activity. Piles of cybermatter were littered everywhere, a large podium was being set up, and media crews had taken positions nearby, chatting to each other as they waited for the main event - the seeding of the farm.

Normally, Jolt and the other Autobots would have preferred to build the farm discreetly, out of the human spotlight. But, as they had learnt over the past few years, humans, especially their media, loved the Autobots and followed them everywhere, documenting their every move. It was impossible to start the farm without a media presence, so the Liaison Team had embraced it, making the seeding of the farm a large media event.

“All right, guys, get ready for a media scrum,” Courtney muttered as they drew close to the crowd.

“Is that a bad thing?” Jazz laughed.

“Only for everyone other than you,” Courtney pointed out. “We all know how much you love attention.”

“Lucky for the rest of you fusspots then, isn’t it?” Jazz reasoned. “I hog the spotlight while the rest of you hog the shadows.”

“Speaking of which, better get the Wreckers’ attention before we arrive,” Courtney said.

“Let me take care of that,” Jazz replied, and he promptly braked hard, allowing Leadfoot to ram into him.

“What d’you you think you’re doing?” Leadfoot shouted, honking his horn in anger. “That hurt!”

“It’s his way of saying we’re here,” Jolt said wearily.

“Well?” Roadbuster said. “We’re waiting for an answer, laddie!”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Courtney muttered as the truck she was riding in pulled up before it could crash into Topspin. “You’re all stupider than you look.” Sighing, she undid her seatbelt and opened the door, stepping out of the truck. “Thanks for the ride, Teletraan,” she said, before closing the door and walking over to the two men waiting for her amongst the ocean of journalists. “Major Lennox,” she saluted.
Lennox sighed. “You know we’re all on first-name terms here, right, Courtney?” he asked. “We’ve known each other for...five years now? Come on.”

“Yessir...Major,” Courtney teased.

Lennox rubbed his forehead. He couldn’t recall an occasion where Courtney hadn’t referred to him as ‘Major’ - it was one of her idiosyncrasies that got on his nerves. As he’d tried to emphasise, the Liaison Team wasn’t the military; they could call each other whatever they wanted. With another sigh, he changed the subject. “You’re late,” he noted. “Epps and I were getting worried.”

“We were travelling with Jazz and the Wreckers,” Courtney pointed out. “You know what they’re like.”

“That we do,” Sergeant Robert Epps agreed, shaking his head at the display behind Courtney. The Autobots had transformed, and Jazz, Roadbuster and Leadfoot appeared to be engaged in a heated argument, while Jolt and Topspin watched exasperatedly from the side.

“Huh?” Courtney asked, turning her head. She rolled her eyes. “Let them fight, they’ve been driving for over a day straight. Release their pent up energy.”

Lennox shook his head. “If they carry on much longer, they’ll end up squashing someone. Look.”

Courtney turned round again; the media crews had noticed the fight and had eagerly gathered close to the Autobots to film them. Lennox was right, though, there were a couple of near misses, and it was only a matter of time before someone was hurt. “Idiots,” she snorted.

“Come on, let’s go sort them out,” Epps said, and he strolled over to the media scrum and began gesturing for them to move.

“Tell Jolt and Jazz to meet me over at the podium,” Lennox. “Let’s just get this thing over and done with as quickly as possible.”

Courtney nodded before running over to the Autobots. Breaking up giant robot fights was never an easy thing.

Twenty minutes later, the media had calmed down from the excitement of the fight, and had taken their seats in front of the podium, behind which Jazz, Jolt and Lennox stood. Lennox glanced down at his notes before clearing his throat and stepping forwards.

“Hello? Everyone, your attention please,” Lennox said, tapping the microphone. Heads turned, the chattering ceased, and cameras were pointed in his direction. “As the senior member of the Human-Autobot Liaison Team, I thank you all for coming here today. As you know, over the past half-decade, we have created a strong friendship with the Autobots. It is my pleasure to today officially unveil the latest fruit of this friendship: a second Energon Farm. This will supply both the Autobots and several scientific institutions worldwide with a fresh source of Energon, allowing many new scientific endeavours to be undertaken.” He paused and glanced behind him. Jolt nodded. “I’d now like to introduce the Autobot engineer, Jolt, who will give you a rundown on how the farm will operate.”

Lennox stepped back from the microphone, while Jolt adjusted the output of his vocal processors.

“Well, the farm itself is quite simple, truthfully,” the Autobot explained. “Energon crystals spread sideways until they reach the Cybermatter walls, then grow upwards when they can’t spread
anymore. We use a number of drones to harvest the taller crystals, bringing them to the central tower for purification and storage. Most of what we harvest gets put back into the farm itself, speeding the construction of the infrastructure in the farms, and the growth of the Energon itself. The rest we use for our own purposes, or in this case, is also given to your scientific establishments for study.”

Several journalists immediately raised their hands, spewing forth questions.

“One - one at a time, please,” Lennox said quickly. “There’ll be time for everyone.”

The babble ceased and all hands save one were lowered.

“Erm, Mister Jolt,” a young reporter asked, “Will highly advanced weapons be built into the farm, like the one in Nevada? How do we know you won’t use them to attack us?”

“I’ll take this one, if you don’t mind,” Lennox said hurriedly, interceding before Jolt could reply. “All construction plans were vetoed by the White House,” he explained. “They don’t have any problem with it, so neither should anyone. Yes, the farm will have defences, but that’s all they are. If there’s anything these guys have learnt after millennia of war, it’s that you never leave anything undefended.”

“And just in case you forgot,” added Jazz, “We’re out in the middle of nowhere, here. Nothing’s gonna hit anything”

“I think that settles it,” Lennox said. “Next question please.”

“Yes, ah, you’ve probably heard a lot about environmental safety while you’ve been on Earth…” a second reporter said. “How do we know that the Energon Farm won’t have adverse effects on the environment?”

Jolt shrugged. “Energon’s inert, not radioactive, releases no contaminants, and grows in a predictable manner. The chances of it disrupting nearby ecosystems are so close to zero it isn’t worth considering.”

“But in case something did go wrong...is that why built it here, in New Mexico?”

“That’s part of the reason, yes. This site was chosen for its remoteness; no unwanted human interference, and in the essentially impossible event of an emergency, everything is contained to this area.”

As third reporter asked their question, Jazz’s internal comm. unit beeped - Teletraan was trying to contact him. Hoping it was nothing serious, he opened a link. “What’s up, Teletraan?”

“Alert, large-scale Organic Lifeform similar to Organism: Axehead and Organism: Philippine Kaiju detected,” the computer intoned. “Target detected in Ocean: Pacific, and is moving Direction: North-East, towards Location: the American Continents.”

“Another one of those dirty monsters?” Jazz said incredulously. “Teletraan, have you contacted Prime?”

“Affirmative,” Teletraan replied. “Optimus Prime will be enroute to predicted landfall co-ordinates shortly.”

“Tell him that I’ll meet him there. No way I’m missing out on this one!”
“Affirmative,” Teletraan said, and terminated the link.

Armed with this new information, Jazz was left in an awkward situation: how to slip away unnoticed from a large media event? He scanned the area, searching for ideas. Blow something up? Too stupid, and they'd see him do it. Nonchalantly walk away? Everyone would ask questions. But then he glanced over at the Wreckers, who were standing beside the journalists, obviously bored. He smiled and opened a private comm. channel to Leadfoot.

“Oi, Leadfoot,” he called. “Do me a favour and hit Roadbuster!”

“What?”

“You heard me, hit Roadbuster, I need a distraction.”

“You bored of this thing too, or you got another reason that you don’t want to tell me?”

Jazz sighed. “Teletraan’s picked up another of those giant creatures, and I’m going to help, but I need to get out of here without everyone noticing,” he explained. “Now will you hit him?”

Leadfoot punched Roadbuster.

“Hey, what do yer think yer doin’?” Roadbuster demanded. “Wasn’t one fight enough fer you? You got another one then!” He launched himself at his teammate, tackling him to the ground. The media crews noticed this and immediately turned their cameras to film the second fight of the day, giving Jazz the opportunity he needed. Grinning to himself, he quickly backed away from the podium.

“Where are you going?” a familiar voice asked from behind him.

Wincing, Jazz turned. Courtney was standing there, eyebrows raised and arms folded. “You’re not trying to sneak away, are you?” she said. “Oh, come on,” she laughed, noticing Jazz’s guilty expression. “Leadfoot hitting Roadbuster for no reason? I knew something had to be going on. Spill.”

“I told Teletraan I’d meet up with Prime on the West Coast,” Jazz explained. “Teletraan’s detected another of those big scary monsters. Don’t want to miss out this time.”

“What!” Courtney hissed. “Another one? Damn…” She rubbed her temples, feeling quite faint. She looked up at Jazz. “You better go then,” she told him. “Optimus will need all the help he can get. Go, I’ll cover for you.”

“Thanks Courtney,” Jazz said gratefully, and he turned and began running away from the tower, transforming as he went, churning up a cloud of dust behind him. He only hoped he could reach the coast in time…

For hours he drove on, ignoring every speed limit, every speed camera, and every police car. Only once was he forced to slow down - as he transformed and jumped over a police barricade. Needless to say, he wasn’t hindered after that. Teletraan kept him up to date as he continued on his journey, and eventually managed to narrow down the creature’s projected path to the Mexican city of Cabo San Lucas just as Jazz crossed the border into Arizona. The Autobot immediately turned south, heading towards the border.

The Autobots have urged residents of Cabo San Lucas to begin evacuating after their systems
detected yet another giant monster in the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Lieutenant Courtney Gallant of the Human-Autobot Liaison Team confirmed that the Autobots were already en route to meet the threat.

“As soon as Teletraan detected the monster, the Autobots were alerted,” Courtney’s voice explained. “Most of them are moving towards the location where the monster is predicted to make landfall as I speak.”

“Is that why Jazz left during the Wreckers’ fight?” a journalist asked.

“Yes, he left to help fight the monster. Now, if you’ll excuse me, we’ve got an energon seed to plant.”

That was Lieutenant Courtney Gallant speaking from the opening of the second Energon Farm in New Mexico earlier today. In related news: should the Autobots intervene in political affairs? With the crises in the Middle East and the ongoing conflict in the Ukraine, many have questioned why -

Wheeljack turned his radio off. “Well, we know Jazz is definitely on his way,” he said, staring out across the ocean. He, along with Sideswipe, Crosshairs, Hound and the Twins were in Cabo, having immediately flown there from Washington once Teletraan had detected the monster. After a four and a half hour flight in one of the newly-built planes that he, Ratchet and Jolt had designed, they had arrived - and had been waiting at the beach ever since.

“At this rate, he’ll be here before the monster is,” Hound commented, scooping up a pile of sand and letting it run through his fingers.

“So much for urgent,” Crosshairs scoffed. “We’ve been out in the sea breeze for hours - I can feel my paint oxidising by the second.”

“Quit your whining,” Hound huffed. “Sometime you sound like those two idiots.” He nodded to his right, where the Twins were parked peacefully in their altmodes. It was a welcome change from their near-constant bickering.

“I suppose I do,” Crosshairs shrugged. “But that’s better than being a silent type. Topspin, for example. Never says a thing. Don’t know anything about him other than his name, and even then I’m not sure about that!”

“At least he doesn’t talk as much as Kup,” Hound muttered.

Wheeljack shook his head and glanced up at Sideswipe, who was sitting on the grassy knoll behind the beach, scanning the ocean. Sideswipe had refused to join them on the beach itself, saying that the sand would make its way into his feet. A fair assessment, Wheeljack thought, considering his feet were wheels.

“Seen anything, Sideswipe?” the Autobot scientist asked.

“Nothing,” Sideswipe sighed. “Just this water stuff.”

“Teletraan said he’d let us know when the creature was a couple o’ kliks out, didn’t he?” Hound said. “It’ll rock up soon. And when he does, we’ll make him wish he hadn’t!”

“How about no?” Crosshairs suggested. “How about we just run away and wait for Prime to take care of it? Once he busts out the big guns, the monster ain’t got a hope.”

“How about we do what boss man ordered, and hold the monster off until he arrives?” Hound
countered. “You got a problem with that?”

“Actually,” Wheeljack interrupted, “Crosshairs’ plan does sound pretty good. I mean,” he added quickly as Sideswipe and Hound glared at him. “I did come along just for the chance to study this creature while it was alive...and before it decomposes so much it’s useless. I’m not sure I’d be that useful in a fight.”

Sideswipe considered. “Go and wait somewhere else, then,” he said kindly. “Make sure you can see it though. Wouldn’t want you to miss your opportunity to study it.”

Wheeljack nodded, and began walking away from the beach.

“Hey, Skids, Jackie’s all scared of da monster,” Mudflap sniggered, his altmode shaking slightly. “He’s afraid he might get squashed.”

“Let him get squashed then,” Skids replied. “But that’d never happen to us; we’re too skilled.”

“We’re like ninjas,” Mudflap agreed. “Using them ninja skills to take the big bad guy down.”

Wheeljack rolled his optics before transforming and driving off.

“Yeah, let me know too,” Crosshairs began, pushing himself off the ground, only for Hound to force him back down. “Or not.”

“I got my eye on you,” Hound growled. “Stay put.”

“Hmph. May as well get comfortable, then,” Crosshairs reasoned, and he lay back and put his hands behind his head, basking in the sunlight.

Hound grunted and began pacing backwards and forwards down the beach, keeping the green Autobot in his view at all times. He kept this up for several minutes before Sideswipe suddenly cried out in alarm.

“Scrap,” he said, pushing himself to his feet. “It’s here.”

Hound and Crosshairs looked out across the ocean - there was some disturbance out on the horizon; a dark shape was rising out of the water.

Hound broke out in a broad grin. “Haha, yeah,” he said happily, reaching behind his back and detaching his minigun. “Time to kick some ass.”

“Now we talking,” Skids said as he and his brother transformed. “You ready to ready to teach the big scary monster a lesson?” he asked.

“Never mess with the Twins!” Mudflap replied, and the two bumped their oversized fists.

“Ah well, it had to get here eventually,” Crosshairs said tiredly as the creature let out a terrifying roar. “Better late than never.”

Right on cue, Teletraan opened a comm. link with them all.

‘Alert, alert,’ he warned, ‘Organism: Kaiju Three has emerged from ocean off the coast of Location: Cabo San Lucas. Urgent action required.’

“Computers: always a second too slow,” Crosshairs muttered.
“Alright, stop complaining and get over here,” Sideswipe ordered. “We need a plan of attack, because let’s face it, we’re not going to hold it off for very long.”

“Pop a cap in its ass,” Skids suggested immediately.

Sideswipe ignored him. “Crosshairs, d’you reckon you could snipe the eyes from here?”

“Is that even a question?” Crosshairs laughed. “Course I can.”

“Right, position yourself and get ready. Hound, you got any of those penetrator missiles left?”

“I gotta couple,” Hound replied. “Bout twenty or so.”

“Excellent, use them to encourage him to stay off the coast after ‘Hairs blinds him.”

“You all scared,” Mudflap piped up. “You just don’ wanna fight the big monster up close.”

“Oh, we will if we have to,” Sideswipe said. He grinned slyly. “Since you two seem so eager, you can have the first go if he does manage to make it to the coast before Optimus arrives.”

Mudflap and Skids glanced at each other.

“He volunteers first!” Skids said a second later, pointing at his brother. “He’ll use his ninja skills to take it down.”

“Yeah, I’ll sneak up on it, climb on its head and -”

“I don’t care who goes first,” Sideswipe said, cutting Mudflap off. “Just make sure you do it.”

“Uh, guys...it’s getting close,” Hound pointed out. The creature was considerably closer, and most of its body and risen above the water, revealing a dual horned head attached to a sickeningly grey body, with a long, thick tail.

“Crosshairs, you got a clear shot?” Sideswipe asked.

“Give me a moment,” the green Autobot said. He was standing ankle-deep in the ocean, his right arm transformed into a gun resembling a sniper rifle. “Almost...there.” He let off a shot.

A few seconds later, a loud, agonising roar echoed across the landscape. Crosshairs had found his mark.

“Come on you big ugly thing, turn around...gotcha!” He shot again and smiled in satisfaction as the creature howled in agony.

“Woah,” Mudflap said, staring up in awe at the monster as it began thrashing around in the water, sending large waves out in every direction, “that’s one big motherf-”

The creature roared.

“Hound!” Sideswipe called.

“On it!” the bulky Autobot replied. He quickly transformed and opened up a section of his roof, revealing several lethal looking missiles. “Take this, you son of a bitch,” he growled, and fired. Three penetrator missiles flew briefly through the air before finding their mark, burrowing deep into the monster’s abdomen before exploding.
“Did it work?” Hound asked.

“If you count howling in pain, then yes,” Crosshairs replied, retracting his gun. “I think we’ve made it clear what happens if he decides to get closer.”

While Sideswipe, Crosshairs and Hound congratulated each other on their efforts, the Twins were standing on the beach, taunting the monster as it writhed in pain, clawing at its face in a desperate attempt to restore its vision.

“Not so scary now, are you?” Skids jeered. “Not after Crosshairs busted yo’ eyes!”

“Autobots beat giant ugly monsters!” Mudflap chanted, before a comm. channel was opened.

“Um,” Wheeljack said rather worriedly, “I’m not an organics expert, but judging by its behaviour, I think you’ve made it angry…”

Sideswipe, Hound and Crosshairs whirled around. Wheeljack was right. While the creature was undoubtedly experiencing immense pain, it was also thrashing about in the water in a manner that suggested fury was the dominant emotion. It also seemed to be growing larger...

“Scrap,” Hound moaned, realising that it was heading towards the shore.

“Move!” Sideswipe cried, and he quickly skidded out of the way; Hound and Crosshairs close behind him.

The Twins, on the other hand, remained on the beach, defiantly standing the ground as the thrashing monster came ever closer.

“No you don’t!” Skids shouted up with it. “No way you’re setting foot on this beach!”

“Yeah, you ain’t getting past the Twins!” Mudflap agreed.

But their cries had little impact, and the monster began to stumble onto the beach anyway, its hooves leaving deep impressions in the wet sand.

“Mudflap, Skids, get out of there!” crackled Sideswipe’s voice over their comm. links. “We need Hound to fire another round of missiles to get it off the coast!”

“We don’t need no missiles,” Skids muttered, ignoring Sideswipe’s frantic calls for them to retreat. “Ready to show them how it’s done?” he asked his brother.

“Time to pop a cap in this thing’s ass,” Mudflap cheered, and he fired a grappling line from his wrist, which wound itself around one of the creature’s demon-like horns. “Yeah, we takin’ this thing down!” he shouted as he was pulled upwards.

“Not without me you aren’t!” Skids said, and a few moments he had joined his brother, balancing precariously on the section of thick, hardened skin. At that moment, however, the creature jerked, and the grapple slipped. The movement knocked Skids on his back, and he began sliding off the horn.

“I’m alright, I’m alright,” Skids said nervously, desperately trying to claw his way to relative safety.

“Come on, man, I got you,” Mudflap said, holding out his hand. As Skids reached up to take it, the monster let out a tremendous bellow and recoiled in pain as another round of missiles impacted its
hide. The movement was so great that Skids lost whatever grip he had on the creature’s horn, and he began plummeting to the ground.

Thinking quickly, the green Autobot immediately fired another grappling line, but before it could reach its mark, the monster twisted sharply, and, out of nowhere, its tail appeared, hitting Skids and sending him flying.

“No!” Mudflap shouted in anguish as his brother disappeared from view. Crawling carefully along the horn, he looked desperately for a hint of green among the dull yellow sand. Nothing.

All of a sudden, he cried out in pain as his Spark seemingly disappeared. He felt...empty, like something inside of him was missing. His cognitive processors reeled. He didn’t know how he knew it, he just did. Skids, his twin, his brother, was dead.

His brother was dead.

Dead. Brother.

Skids was dead.

The world became crystal clear clarity, the revelation settling down on his Spark, the full reality setting in.

Mudflap loosened.

Skids was dead.

Mudflap screamed.

Skids was dead.

He could no longer think properly; all he knew was that he had to avenge his twin. Ignoring everything around him; the movement of the creature, the desperate attempts by the other Autobots to get him to withdraw, to the sound of a plane flying overhead, he transformed his right hand into a plasma cannon with agonising slowness. His energon burned within his system as he drew every last bit he could and forced it into his weapon. His optics narrowed fiercely as he dismissed the protests of his body, ignoring the ever-growing area of discolouration on his body as it was drained of energy.

A bright, luminous red blast spiked out of his gun, lancing into the monster’s head, incinerating and punching a hole straight through the tough hide and thick skull before searing straight through the brain. Mudflap felt the backwash of heat and ionized plasma, and the screeching of the Cybermatter within his gun as it handled far too much energy far too quickly, but he didn’t care. Nothing mattered until his brother was avenged.

But despite all the damage he had caused, he had not succeeded. Although the brain had been all but destroyed, the creature was still standing, and was periodically emitting agonized roars as it swayed where it stood.

Mudflap drew yet more energy, stealing away every last drop, leaving himself so utterly devoid of it that the discolouration spread to cover his entire body, leaving it a dull grey.

He pulled every ounce he could, shoving another blast through the monster’s back, dimly recalling Ratchet’s lectures about these creatures having two brains. Dimmer, duller than the previous one, this blast failed to burn all the way though, not even searing through all of the skin protecting the
spine. But he would not give up, even as the Cybermatter that composed his form began to break
down, flaking into a trillion pieces, losing strength with the lack of power.

He reached Deeper, right down to his very Spark, and Pulled.

Core Energon flooded his systems, drawn from the very fabric of his Spark, the fuel of his
existence.

His self repair systems kicked into overdrive, repairing his Cybermatter just as fast as it broke
down, as more energy than Mudflap had ever felt flowed directly through his body and into his
gun. He loosened a third shot.

This blast was not the bright, luminous red of the previous two; it was a blinding white, a miniature
sun compared to mere candles before.

Mudflap watched, his processors overclocked to the extreme, as the bolt flew towards Kaiceph’s
back. It didn’t even reach the skin before the sheer heat and energy radiating away sublimated it,
burning it away so fast it almost seemed to just cease to exist, cauterizing the entire surrounding
flesh with frightening ease.

The monster didn’t even have time to comprehend what happened before its spinal cord was
cleaved in two, and its secondary brain was destroyed.

It was dead.

A single thought passed through Mudflap’s processors before the backlash of using so much
energy hit him: Skids was avenged.

Mudflap toppled backwards off the creature as it too fell, finally defeated by the orange Autobot.
He was dead before he had even begun to fall.
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

Jazz reaches Cabo to find the Autobots mourning the loss of Mudflap and Skids. Together they decide what to do with Skids' remains.

Despite leaving the energon farm as soon as Teletraan detected the monster, Jazz didn't arrive in Cabo until five hours after it was killed, and in some ways, he was very thankful of that fact. Witnessing the deaths of...teammates...he had known for quite some time was not something he wished to experience again - he'd had enough of that on Cybertron, to say nothing of what came after. Being informed of the Twins' untimely demise by Ironhide as he was crossing the Gulf of Mexico had, rather unfortunately, allowed him to reflect on the fact that for the past six years, the Autobot fatality rate had been zero - a record that had been unbroken for, well, the entire War. It wasn't a pleasant prospect to think about, especially considering that most of his fellow Autobots had come to Earth expecting to escape the wanton amounts of death and destruction that they had witnessed both on and off Cybertron. For a while, it had seemed like those expectations would be reality, but those hopes had been dashed.

As a result, it was a sombre affair when Jazz pulled up on the beach, the blue blood-stained sand glinting in the pale light of the crescent moon. The monster's carcass was casting a giant shadow across the beach, and most of the other Autobots had found refuge in it, sitting around looking rather agitated. A couple, like Mirage, were sitting separate from the main group, evidently not wanting the others' company. All were seemingly preoccupied with staring at the sand beneath them, so much so that none even raised their heads as Jazz slowly transformed, his shifting metal and circuitry carving small dunes in the sand.

"Where are they?" he asked.

He received no reply for several seconds, until Crosshairs raised an arm and pointed vaguely at the grassy knoll to Jazz's right. Jazz turned and quickly saw one of the recently-built aircraft, no doubt the one Optimus, Ironhide, Ratchet and Mirage had arrived in only seconds before Mudflap had killed the monster. Evidently they had moved Skids' body into the hold. A few seconds later, Jazz had covered the distance between him and the plane, and had opened the door, allowing him to gaze down sadly at the Skids' body. It was mostly intact, and certainly recognisable, but the left arm was almost completely severed from the torso, connected only by thin strands of circuitry. Then, of course, was the gaping hole in the chest, indicating that Skids had been impaled directly through his Spark Chamber. Jazz winced. Sparks were the lifeforce of Cybertronians, containing their memories, personalities and soul. If their Chamber was destroyed, then that particular Cybertronian was gone for good. Skids would have died immediately.

Jazz averted his optics. The mere thought of the destruction of Skids' Spark Chamber made him feel rather uncomfortable by reminding him of his closest near-death experience. When Megatron had bisected him during the battle of Mission City, the Decepticon leader had uncharacteristically left his Spark Chamber completely unharmed. Perhaps he had been too preoccupied with the imminent arrival of Optimus to notice, or maybe a few thousand years of being stuck in ice had cost him some basic cognitive recognition. Whatever the reason, Megatron's oversight had allowed Ratchet to fuse his body back together and revive him with an Allspark shard quite soon
after, but the medic never missed an opportunity to remind him that he had been very, very lucky to survive. Unfortunately, Skids had had no such luck.

“It was my fault, you know.” Hound’s voice broke the silence as he walked up behind Jazz. “I shot the missiles that shook him off balance. Not that he should have been up there in the first place, but still…”

Jazz looked up sympathetically at his friend. “Accidents happen,” he said simply.

“Yeah,” Hound agreed. “Never thought I’d say this, but I kinda miss him.” He stared sadly at the pile of grey cybermatter. “Ah well,” he said a moment later. “He got off better than Mudflap. Nothin’ left of him, and we spent hours looking all over the place. Wasn’t till Ratchet scanned the area for traces of cybermatter that we realised we’d been walking all over him.” He let out a bitter laugh and trundled back down to the rest of the Autobots.

With a final glance at Skids’ body, Jazz followed him. “Anyone know where Prime is?” he asked upon reaching the group.

“He went walking somewhere with Ironhide and Ratchet,” Mirage said, his back turned as he stared out over the ocean. “The Twins’ death hit him hard…you know what he’s like.”

“Well, it had to happen eventually,” Crosshairs said. “What?” he added as several of his fellow Autobots glared at him. “They were two clowns, always fooling around.” He laughed, a low, bitter sound completely devoid of humour. “The fact that they survived this long is a miracle.”

“He’s right,” Hound mumbled. “Why did they last this long, and not some of the others. Bulkhead, Rotorstorm…”

“Damn you, Primus,” Sideswipe muttered, earning a chuckle from Hound and Crosshairs.

“So, uh, when did Prime get here?” Jazz asked quietly.

“Just before Mudflap killed the creature,” Wheeljack said sadly. “But it was too late. Even if Optimus and Ironhide had manage to stop him from killing it, he’d have died a few cycles later. The Twin Spark effect can’t be stopped.”

Sideswipe shifted uncomfortably, and Wheeljack cursed.

“Sorry, Sideswipe,” he said hurriedly. “I forgot…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sideswipe mumbled, looking miserably at the sand. “Doesn’t matter.”

“What doesn’t matter?” asked a gruff voice. A second later, Ironhide emerged from the shadows, with Ratchet and Optimus right behind him.

“‘Bout time you guys got back,” Crosshairs muttered. “You’ve been gone since sunset.”

Ironhide shrugged. “Lot’s to talk about,” he said, exchanging glances with Ratchet.

Jazz looked up at Optimus. “You alright, Prime?” he asked. “You don’t look too good.”

Optimus sighed. “I will be, Jazz,” he said, before addressing the Autobots as a whole. “I know the past few hours have been difficult for us all, myself included. But now is not the time to let our grief get the better of us. There are much more important questions we need to consider. What are the monsters, and why do they attack the humans? Where do they come from?” He paused briefly,
bowing his head. “And what shall we do with the remains of our fallen friends?”

“Well, there ain’t anything left of Mudflap,” Crosshairs said, “unless you want to filter the entire beach for bits of him.”

“We could bury Skids in the sand,” Hound suggested, earning a scowl from Ratchet.

“Something more dignified would be preferable,” the medic said. “Just because we live with the humans does not mean we have to follow their death rituals. Besides, the cybermatter that makes up our bodies isn’t likely compatible with this planet’s ecological recycling processes. At least human bodies break down over a reasonable amount of time. Ours can go millennia without the slightest change.”

“We could burn him,” Mirage said. “That’s what some of the Neutrals did back in the early days of the war.”

“We’re not Neutrals,” Ironhide huffed. “We’re Autobots!”

“Faction distinctions never made much difference to death rites during the War, Ironhide,” Sideswipe said tiredly. “Both sides left their dead out on the battlefield. What else could they do?”

“We could always recycle,” Wheeljack piped up. “Melt Skids down and use his cybermatter for something useful.”

“Like the energon farm,” Jazz added. “We could make a memorial or something, dedicate the farm to their memory.”

Crosshairs laughed. “There’s no way I’m going near that farm if that happens,” he said. “Yeah, I’m kinda sad that they’re dead, but I don’t want to remember them! I’ve had enough of their crap for a lifetime.”

Everyone ignored him.

“Well, Optimus,” Wheeljack said. “What do you think?”

Optimus considered. Recycling Skids’ body did seem like the best option, and using it to construct a memorial at the energon farm would ensure that his and his brother’s sacrifice was not forgotten.

“Make it happen, “ he said.

~8~

“I’ve contacted Lennox,” Jazz reported early the next morning. “He knows we’re coming.”

“Thank you, Jazz,” Optimus said. “Get Sideswipe to prepare the dropship; we are almost ready to leave.”

“Sure thing, Prime.”

Optimus looked around as Jazz walked away. In stark contrast to the previous night, the beach was bustling with activity, as humans worked with Ironhide, Hound and Mirage to collect the sand contaminated by the monster’s blood. While they still weren’t sure of most of the blood’s properties, they did know that it stained almost everything and was extremely difficult to remove. Even cybermatter wasn’t completely safe - it had taken the Autobots weeks to purge the stains gained from when they’d fought the first monster in San Francisco almost a year previously.
Optimus opened a comm. channel to Wheeljack, who was currently climbing all over the monster, taking as many samples as he could. “Wheeljack, have you contacted the Navy yet?”

There was a brief pause before Wheeljack responded. “Yes, Optimus; they’re sending an aircraft carrier around to move the creature to a government facility so we can study it. They’ll need all the help they can get to get it onto the ship though.”

“That should not be a problem,” Optimus replied. “Tell Hound and Ironhide that I’ve asked them to help you when the Navy arrives.”

“Will do,” Wheeljack said, and ended the connection.

Behind Optimus, the engines of the Autobot dropship roared into life.

“Everyone ready?” Sideswipe shouted from the pilot's chair, ducking his head around the doorway to the cargo hold.

“Yes,” Crosshairs said, entering the plane and immediately sitting down next to Jazz. “Let’s get away from this hellhole.”

“Optimus?” Ratchet called, already settled down in his vehicle mode.

With a final glance around the beach, Optimus climbed into the hold and transformed into truck mode. A second later, the door slid shut.

“Here we go,” Sideswipe said, somewhat gleefully, and activated the ship’s VTOL, lifting it into the air.

“Hey now, you’re not flying are you?” Jazz asked worriedly. “You know Teletraan can fly it instead?”

“Yeah, but that’s no fun,” Sideswipe replied. “I much prefer flying myself.”

Crosshairs and Jazz exchanged looks and quickly integrated their feet into the floor, thanking Primus that Skids’ body was secured very safely in the compartment behind them.

~8~

It was mid-afternoon by the time Optimus and the others arrived at the energon farm, swooping down from the sky to land safely near the farm’s main tower. Much to everyone’s relief, only Lennox, Epps, Courtney and the Wreckers were there to greet them; the media having been ordered out of the area several hours previously.

“Good to see you again, Optimus,” greeted Lennox as the Autobot leader exited the plane. “Just a shame it wasn’t in better circumstances.”

“Likewise, Major Lennox,” Optimus replied. He stood to one side, allowing Jazz and Crosshairs to step out of the plane as well, carrying Skids’ body.

Courtney frowned. Skids was green, wasn’t he? So why was his body now a dull grey?

Epps was thinking the same thing. “Why’s he grey?” he asked. “He was green before.”

“Lack of energon,” Ratchet answered, walking up behind Optimus. “Similar to what would happen if you humans were depleted of your blood supply.”
“Oh…” Courtney said faintly. Just the thought made her queasy.

“How’d he get like that then?” Epps said as the Wreckers directed Jazz, Crosshairs and Sideswipe over to a specially prepared section of the tower. “The monster slit his throat?”

“If only,” Ratchet sighed. “No, he lost all of his energon because he used it to kill the monster.”

“He took one of those things down by himself?” Lennox said, surprised. “But - how?”

“Used his plasma cannon to burn a hole right through both of the sucker’s brains,” Crosshairs interrupted. “Most effective thing I’ve ever seen him do.”

“But we’ve analysed those things, man,” Epps said. “Breaking through all that skin and bone isn’t easy. Mudflap’s plasma cannon wouldn’t be able to get through by itself.”

“So he used up all his energon to increase the power output…” Lennox realised. “But why would he do that?”

Ratchet glanced at Optimus. “Should I tell them, Prime?”

Optimus nodded. “Yes, this is information they deserve to know in light of recent events.” He smiled. “I know you like your explanations, old friend, but do try to keep it simple.”

“My explanations are always simple,” Ratchet sniffed.

“Except that one he did with Wheeljack about energon,” Epps muttered to Lennox, who grimaced.

“I take it that this is a long explanation?” Courtney asked as Optimus walked over to the others.

“Fairly,” Ratchet admitted. “Have you got the time?”

Lennox shrugged. “Suppose. We were just about to head back to Washington when you called, but we can stick around for a little longer.”

“Very well then,” Ratchet said. “I suppose the answer to your question starts with the very creation of our species. I’ll spare you the details, but essentially all of us were ‘birthed’ from the Well of Allsparks, a part of the very core of Cybertron itself.”

Epps frowned. “If you don’t have parents, then how do you get twins?”

“The birthing process occasionally produced anomalies,” Ratchet continued. “Sometimes a Spark would split during the creation process, producing two sparklings instead of one. You remember what a Spark is, of course? Good. Now, from what I understand, the splitting is very similar to how human twins are created, so we chose that word when translating our term for the anomaly. Cybertronian twins are extremely rare, though; I can only think of a handful of known cases.”

“Mudflap and Skids were one - who were the others?” Courtney asked, interested.

“Well, there were the Decepticons, Skyquake and Dreadwing, then Tread and Trample,” the medic said thoughtfully. “The Autobots Rumbler and Sprocket were twins too, though you wouldn’t guess it.” He sighed. “And then there’s Sideswipe and Sunstreaker.”

“Sideswipe’s a twin?” Courtney said in surprise, glancing over at the silver Autobot as he squabbled with Leadfoot. “He’s never said anything.”

“No, and he doesn’t like to,” Ratchet said. “They haven’t seen each other since they got separated
somewhere in some remote star system a few million years ago while looking for the Allspark. Sideswipe, Arcee, Chromia, Elita and the Twins - Mudflap and Skids, that is - got cut off from Sunstreaker and a few others during a Decepticon attack on their scouting mission. At least that’s what they told us when they arrived here on Earth.”

“Oh…”

“That’s all well and good,” Lennox said impatiently, “but that doesn’t explain why Mudflap would go all kamikaze on us.”

Ratchet sighed. “Well, rather unfortunately, having two Cybertronians formed from the same Spark has rather severe disadvantages. The worst is that, if one’s half-Spark goes offline, the other’s does too.”

All three humans were rather taken aback.

“But - but how does that work?” Courtney asked.

“We don’t know,” Ratchet said honestly. “Not even Shockwave ever found an answer; it’s just how things are. Similarly, for reasons only Primus himself knows, the two halves of the Spark contain different personality traits. And if one half of the Spark is destroyed, so too its traits. That’s why Mudflap went berserk. When Skids died, half of their collective personality did as well - in this case, their rationality. Mudflap lost all ability for rational cognitive processes, and became single-mindedly focused on avenging Skids. That’s why he did a ‘kamikaze’.”

“That’s horrible…” Courtney murmured sadly, and even Lennox and Epps appeared sickened.

“You don’t seem too worried about it,” she told Ratchet, somewhat accusingly.

Ratchet hmphed. “I’ve had several billion years to come to terms with it, Ms Gallant,” he said. “Although there’s nothing I can do to fix it, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t wish there was a way around it. The only things that could make a half-Spark whole and remove the connection to its other half are the Allspark and the Forge of Solus Prime. Unfortunately, both have been inaccessible since before your species evolved.”

“You found the Allspark though,” Lennox pointed out.

“Before Sam destroyed it to kill Megatron,” Epps reminded him. “I don’t think they got the chance to use it.”

“Why didn’t you use it before you launched it off Cybertron then?” Courtney asked.

“Well, there was a war going on, and the effect simply wasn’t known.” Ratchet said. “Our species is quite hardy, and both accidents and Twins were rare enough that up until they were deliberately killed, nobody had ever observed the results. Certainly, nobody had ever wanted to know so badly as to find out, either. There was only a single case of Twins dying, and that particular event killed both of them at the same time. We only discovered the effect by accident long after both items had been lost.”

“Yo, Ratchet, you done over there?” Jazz shouted. “We need you to extract Skids’ spark chamber - what’s left of it anyway.”

Ratchet let out a sad sigh. “It appears as though I’m needed elsewhere,” he said. “But I hope my explanation was substantial enough for you. Now, please excuse me.” He walked off.

“Wow,” Lennox said once Ratchet had gone. “That’s the most we’ve learnt about them all year.”
It was true. Although the Liaison Team and the Autobots had been working closely together for the better part of the last decade, the Cybertronians had divulged very little of their past. It was theorised by members of the team that there was a ‘three tier system of knowledge.’ Tier One was the basics, the information the Autobots had publicly supplied. This included the Great War with the Decepticons, an outline of some of their history, and a few minor details about life on Cybertron. Tier Two was Government Intel, the stuff that the Pentagon and the CIA demanded to know if the Autobots were to stay on Earth; things like the current level of Decepticon threat, weapons capabilities of both sides, and details that related to projects that required government authorisation. Tier Three, however, was saved solely for those the Autobots regarded as true friends. Incredible details of cyberlogical functions and processes, greater insights into Cybertronian culture and history, and even personal anecdotes by the Autobots themselves were grouped in this category. Much to the Liaison Team’s consternation though, Tier Three information came very infrequently.

Courtney grimaced, pushing a few loose strands of blonde hair out of her eyes. “I’d rather that they hadn’t told us all that,” she said. “I’m better off knowing that Sideswipe doesn’t have a constant risk of dying on us because his twin’s out fighting Decepticons. It’s horrible.”

“Well, like Ratchet said, they can’t do much about it. And we all know that if Ratchet says something, it’s generally true.”

“You’re right, I suppose,” Courtney said. “I mean, what do I know? I’m only twenty-seven, and they’re like a bajillion years old.”

“Close enough,” Lennox agreed.

~8~

“Well, I’ve just finished the operation,” Ratchet told Optimus, walking up beside him about half an hour later. “Spark Chamber has been removed...just cybermatter left now.” He held up the mangled remains of Skids’ Spark Chamber.

Optimus lowered his eyes. “Till all are one,” he murmured softly.

Ratchet bowed his head. A sudden, terrible thought occurred to him. “Do you think the creatures will ever stop coming?” he said quietly.

Optimus looked at his old friend with concern. Ratchet was usually among the most optimistic of the Autobots; it wasn’t like him to voice concerns such as this one unless the thought was really bothering him.

"At this stage, I do not expect their arrivals to cease,” he said slowly. “But until we learn more about them, it is unlikely we will be able to ascertain whether or not they will stop appearing.” He sighed. “But for now, Ratchet, it appears as though we shall have to continue to fight these creatures for the foreseeable future.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Ratchet replied. He looked down at the Spark Chamber in his hands. “I’ll go and give this to the Wreckers,” he said. “They’ll keep it secure until it can be used in the memorial.”

Optimus nodded as Ratchet walked off to find the rather crude trio. Although the medic hadn’t said it, Optimus could tell that he was worried about future Autobot casualties. When the first monster had emerged almost a year ago, he would have dismissed Ratchet’s worries as baseless. But now, after Mudflap and Skids had died, it was a completely different situation. Ratchet had a point
though. If the monsters didn’t stop... well, there weren’t an infinite amount of Autobots. Optimus was confident that they could hold them off for a while, but eventually their luck would run out.

Still, that didn’t mean that they couldn’t at least try to stack the odds in their favor. Wheeljack had already attained samples from all three of the creatures, and what he discovered could be put to good use in defending against the creatures, knowledge that they were more than willing to capitalise on.

But that was all in the future, and an unlikely future at that. Time had long since taught him that it was useless trying to determine the machinations of The One. Whatever the future held, the Autobots would face it head on, and they would win.
Chapter Summary

The Autobots converge on Sydney, Australia after the fourth kaiju is detected...

Drift flew calmly through the valley, over the murky waters that, along with landslides caused by torrential rain, had devastated this area of Nepal. Many villages in the surrounding countryside had been threatened, and so for the past two weeks he, Optimus and Ironhide had been evacuating villagers to a larger town in northern India, where Ratchet had set up a temporary refugee camp with the assistance of the Indian Government.

“Are we almost there?” one of his passengers, a young Nepalese child, mumbled quietly to her father. “I’m hungry.”

“We are almost there,” Drift said softly in Nepali, before the father could answer. “I can see the town now.”

So he could. The collection of buildings stood out from the waters below, safe behind a cybermatter flood levy the Autobots had installed upon arriving. A group of white tents was located close to the town – the refugee camp where Drift was headed.

“Hold on,” he warned. “Starting to descend.”

He began to lose altitude slowly, so as not to make the ride uncomfortable for his passengers. After several minutes of this, he flattened out, and carefully landed in a large paddock not far from the tents. His passengers quickly disembarked, glad to be back on solid ground after the long flight from their village in the mountains.

“Thank you, sir,” the young girl said politely to Drift once she was on the ground. “Thank you for saving us.”

Drift smiled inwardly as her father led her away, heading for the camps where they would stay until the floodwaters subsided in a few weeks.

Once everyone had disembarked, he transformed and walked over to the largest tent - Ratchet’s miniature hospital. Sure enough, as he got closer, he could see the Autobot medic leaning over a patient, who looked rather worried about his current position. Ratchet was, after all, six metres tall and weighed just under 7 tonnes.

“Stop squirming!” Ratchet said crossly. “If you keep moving you’ll end up losing the leg. It’s just one needle, that’s all.”

The man finally acquiesced, lying still and screwing up his eyes, preparing for the worst. He needn’t have worried; Ratchet transformed one finger into a small syringe, then delicately injected its contents into the man’s leg.

“There,” he said, satisfied. “Now just wait there for five minutes before you go.”

Still not looking reassured, the man lay back down on his bed, glancing nervously at Drift as he
walked up to his friend.

“I see you continue to traumatise your patients, Ratchet,” Drift said, gesturing to the man on the bed. “They must doubt your ability as a medic.”

“I prefer to think I intimidate them,” Ratchet replied, “which, unlike the doubting of my medical skills, is completely understandable.”

Drift nodded. “It also does not help that humans are rather fragile creatures. A small break in their skin leaves them open to infection.”

“They’re not the most fragile organics I’ve ever seen,” Ratchet mused, “but they could be tougher I suppose.” He shrugged. “Not that it matters – just as long as I can help them. Speaking of which, where’s the latest lot that you brought in?”

“I let them loose in the camp – after some preliminary medical scans came up green,” Drift said hurriedly, before Ratchet could criticise his apparent lack of medical procedure. “They were trapped in their village by floodwaters, not buried. Their condition didn’t merit a visit to you.”

“Hmph,” Ratchet snorted. “I would prefer it if I saw everyone who came into this camp... remember that the next time you get a group who are otherwise fine, will you?”

Drift bowed his head. “Yes, Ratchet. I am sorry for my mistake.”

“No need to apologise.” Ratchet waved him off. “Yes, yes, you can go,” he said irritably to his patient, who had been glancing meaningfully towards rest of the camp for the past minute. “Just don’t overexert yourself for the next few hours.”

Looking very much relieved, the man clambered off his bed and all but ran out of the tent.

Ratchet shook his head. “I told him not to overexert himself – he’ll be back here before the day’s out.”

A horn blared, immediately followed by the sound of screeching tyres.

“Ah, Prime’s back,” Ratchet said.

Sure enough, a few moments later, the familiar form of Optimus Prime’s vehicle mode came into sight, hauling a trailer-load of refugees.

Drift frowned. “There must have been a few more landslides in Sector Five,” he said. “Sensei said he was almost done in that region when I last saw him.”

Ratchet shrugged. “Doesn’t surprise me. It hasn’t stopped raining in Sector Five for three days now, after a few clear days when we first arrived.”

“Rain like you wouldn’t believe, old friend,” Optimus confirmed, ducking under the tent awning. His trailer remained in the open, where people continued to dismount it. “I expect that the area will be flooded again by the end of the week.”

Drift groaned. More work for him.

“Any news of Ironhide?” Ratchet asked.

“He is attempting to reach a village further up the mountain,” Optimus replied. “The condition of the soil indicated that a landslide was imminent. He is unlikely to be back before sundown.”
“Are you going to go back up and help him?”

Optimus was not given a chance to reply, for at that moment a comm. call alert registered in their internal communications centres. It was Wheeljack, broadcasting on an open channel, reaching all Autobots on Earth.

“Wheeljack here,” the Autobot scientist said, “and I’ve got bad news. Another one of those creatures just registered on Teletraan’s scanners - we only detected it this early because of the modifications we made after the last one.”

“Just what I predicted,” Ratchet mumbled sadly.

Optimus slumped, the bad news having seemingly sapped what energy he had remaining. “Wheeljack, do you know where it will make landfall?”

“Not exactly, no, but judging by its current depth, speed and direction of travel, Teletraan’s predicting somewhere in Indonesia or Australia. If it helps, though, I think we’ve got a good idea of where these things come from now. Once we’ve dealt with this one, I’ll see about finding their emergence point.”

“You have my full support with that, Wheeljack,” Optimus said tiredly. “But first, we have to deal with the problem at hand. I’d like you and the Wreckers to leave Washington immediately, and fly to wherever the creature’s eventual landfall point will be. And to the rest of you, I ask the same. We will only be able to defeat this creature as a team.” He paused. “Hound, I would like you to remain in Japan for the time being. We cannot completely abandon those in need, however dire the situation is elsewhere. That is all.”

The others reeled off their agreement to Optimus’ mobilisation order, and the call ended.

“I’ll prep the dropship,” Ratchet said immediately. “We’ll be ready for take-off as soon as Ironhide returns.”

Optimus nodded. “Thank you, Ratchet.” He turned to Drift. “Drift, I would like you to remain behind until the crisis here is over. As grave as the developing situation is, it would be senseless to completely abandon those who are still in need.”

“As you wish, Sensei,” Drift said, nodding in acceptance. “The people here will be well looked after.”

“Make good use of the medical training I’ve given you,” Ratchet said, placing a hand on the blue Autobot’s shoulder. “But remember, the humans are fragile. Be careful.”

“They are safe with me, Ratchet,” Drift said, smiling. “After all, I am considerably shorter than you.”

“Hmph,” Ratchet snorted, walking off to get the dropship ready.

Optimus watched him go, recalling the conversation they had had after the defeat of the previous creature, and the loss of Mudflap and Skids. Ratchet had been worried that the creatures would not stop appearing, and with this latest incident, that didn’t seem too far on the truth. Once this one was taken care of, it was time for more long term plans to be made to combat the monsters. The Autobots could not hold them off indefinitely without sustaining more fatalities. These ‘kaiju’ were capable of doing them harm, and Optimus wasn’t going to take any more risks. They were all in this together.
“I can safely say that the earthquake experienced last week on August Twenty-Four was just that: an earthquake. Although there has been damage to the city of Napa, it is evident that the quake was not an indication of the appearance of another of these ‘kaiju’. On behalf of the Autobot-Human Alliance, I would like to thank to hundreds of volunteers who have assisted us in the recovery effort here in California. We trust you will be able to finish what little there is left to do once we have returned to Washington. Thank you.”

Arcee rolled away from the group of journalists and cameras, relieved that the press conference was over. She, along with Chromia and Elita-One, had flown to California after seismographs detected an earthquake measuring six on the Richter Scale, making it the largest quake in the San Francisco Bay area since that fateful day on August 10 the previous year. As such, it had elicited an immediate response from the Autobots, Bumblebee included, who had quickly driven over from Chicago.

“You did well,” Elita complimented as Arcee pulled up next to her. “One of your better ones, to be sure.”

“Don’t know why ‘Bee couldn’t do it,” Arcee mumbled, shooting a glare at the yellow Autobot. “He’s got more experience with humans.”

Chromia snorted. “I doubt it. All he does is sit in a car park all day waiting for Sam to finish work!”

Bumblebee scowled. “I do not!” he protested.

“Really? What else do you do?”

“I drive him around,” he mumbled.

“Exactly.”

Arcee sighed. “You’re right,” she admitted. “I should be used to it by now. It’s just that the media rubs me up the wrong way. Ever since that interview we did for that magazine when we first arrived…” She clenched her fists; the memory of how the magazine had portrayed her and her sisters still made her energon boil.

“Well, considering that all the humans were insisting another kaiju creature would be appearing on their doorstep at any moment despite the fact that Teletraan hadn’t picked up a thing, I’m surprised you managed to keep your cool. Thought you were going to blow a gasket when that reporter asked if Teletraan could *really* be trusted.”

“Tell me about it,” Arcee sighed. “Anyway, we should be getting back to Washington. You want us to drop you off on the way, ‘Bee?”

Bumblebee shook his head. “I’ll drive; it gives me a chance to stretch my wheels.”

“They must get really stiff in that car park,” Chromia said slyly, earning another scowl from Bumblebee.

All of a sudden, the four Autobots received a comm. link alert.

“It’s Wheeljack,” Elita said in mild surprise. “Must be important if he’s on an open channel.”

They all fell silent, listening intently to Wheeljack as he delivered the bad news, and to Optimus as
he ordered them to mobilise immediately. By the time the call ended, all four were feeling rather depressed.

“Another one,” Elita said glumly. “Why am I not surprised?”

“I’d be more surprised if there wasn’t another one at this point,” Arcee said tiredly. “Every time I think they’ve stopped, I’m proven wrong.”

“They’ve got to stop at some point though,” Chromia pointed out, though her optimism sounded strained. “We just have to be patient.”

“It’s hard to be patient when these things are destroying cities and killing Autobots,” Bumblebee said worriedly. “All the humans are terrified when they hear about another attack on the news, trust me. Sam’s parents were visiting when the first when attacked, and it wasn’t a pretty sight; they practically pushed me down the driveway, screaming for me to kill it.”


It was only a short drive to the Napa airport where their dropship was held, and after a brief delay while they negotiated an emergency flight path out of the area, all four Autobots were soon transformed, parked neatly in the dropship, and en route the other side of the Pacific Ocean. However, they weren’t far into their flight before they received another open comm. call from Wheeljack, who informed them that the creature would likely make landfall in or around Sydney, Australia in less than half a day. It bad news - they simply wouldn’t be able to make it in time, even if they travelled at full speed the entire way.

“Teletraan, what’s our ETA if we maintain our current velocity?” Elita asked.

‘Estimated Time of Arrival: ten point three hours ,’ the computer replied. ‘Flight duration significantly extended due to strong headwinds.’

“Too slow,” Bumblebee said quietly.

“Stupid wind,” Arcee agreed contemptuously. “Just our luck.”

“Is there anything else we can do?” Elita asked.

“Increase the output of the engines beyond maximum?” Bumblebee suggested. “I don’t know how long they would last if we did that, though. Probably not long enough to get us to Australia anyway.”

Arcee closed her optics in concentration. There had to be a way to reach Australia in time - yes that was it!

“They wouldn’t last long enough...in the atmosphere,” she said slowly.” But if there wasn’t any atmosphere…” Her optics flew open. “Screw it,” she snapped, having made a decision. “We’re going to orbit. Yes, I know the engines aren’t made for that,” she admitted, ignoring the others’ objections, “but we gotta get there in time, and I daresay the others will be doing the exact same thing. Teletraan,” she said, “take us to Sydney via LPO.”

‘Affirmative,’ Teletraan said. ‘Rerouting all energon reserves to engines in three, two, one...’

The engines hummed louder, the blue glow of the exhaust rapidly intensified and a split second later the ship lurched forwards, the rapid acceleration forcing the Autobots back against their wheel restraints.

It was a short journey, and soon the dropship had all but left the atmosphere, falling perpetually in a stable orbit at the extremes of the thermosphere. It had been relatively simple to reach LPO; now all they had to do was wait for the Earth’s rotation and their own orbital path to align, allowing them to essentially drop about 431 kilometres down to Australia. While they waited, they took the opportunity to open the hold of the dropship and gaze down on the planet below. The sight of Earth from the edge of space was one they hadn’t seen since they’d first arrived, and certainly hadn’t had the chance to appreciate. After all, Bumblebee had been focusing on his mission to make contact with Sam, and two years later, Arcee, Elita and Chromia had been in the process of awakening themselves from the stasis mode they’d initiated in anticipation of the long journey to Earth. But now, after living amongst the humans for the better part of a decade, the sight of the Blue Planet below was one they really did appreciate.

After flybys of several satellites and the International Space Station, Teletraan decreased the power output of the engines, beginning a fast orbital decay. Normally, this manoeuvre would be drawn out over a few hours, but due to the necessity to reach Australia as soon as possible, it would have to be completed quickly, G-Forces be damned, not that they were likely to be a problem anyway. The Autobots could withstand G-Forces in amounts considerably higher than humans without any ill effect, and it also helped that the cybermatter that made up the dropship was extremely heat resistant.

‘Orbital decay: complete,’ informed Teletraan. ‘Currently executing re-entry procedures. Estimated time of arrival in Location: Sydney is half an hour.’

“Now comes the fun bit,” Arcee muttered. “I hope Jolt put good gyroscopes in these things.”

“Relax,” Chromia said. “If Jolt put them in, then we’re fine. If Wheeljack had done it…”

Arcee suddenly got the mental picture of the the dropship exploding, and the resulting fall she’d have to endure immediately afterwards. It wasn’t a pretty image, and she quickly dismissed it from her neural circuits.

It wasn’t long before the dropship began to shake as the atmosphere grew thicker; a red glow shone through the window as the surrounding air was heated up to several hundred degrees celsius. This continued for a good twenty-five minutes before the ship levelled out, the shaking stopped, and the glow subsided.

Chromia transformed and opened the hold door once more, revealing a bright, clear sky, with the metropolis of Sydney sprawled out across the landscape below.

“We’re here,” she said. “Looks like they’ve got an evacuation going - the roads heading out of the city are crammed.”

“Just as long as we get a flight path into Holsworthy,” Elita said. “They’ll be getting people out by planes as well using all available airstrips, I’d imagine.”

“We’re given priority, we’ll be fine,” Chromia shrugged. She was right. A bit over five minutes later, the dropship had landed safely at the Holsworthy Military Airport, nestled away in some bush to the south-west of the city. As they taxied across the tarmac, they spotted two other dropships parked close to a hanger. The other Autobots had arrived before them.
“I think this is the first time I’ve been outside the United States,” Bumblebee said conversationally as he and the sisters disembarked.

“You haven’t been to another country?” Chromia said incredulously. “Bee, you are missing out. Once this whole thing’s over, you and I are going on a drive around Australia.”

“Sounds good,” Bumblebee replied, smiling.

Ratchet emerged from a nearby hangar to greet them.

“Good to see you again, Bumblebee,” he said. “I hope Sam and Mikaela aren’t giving you much trouble?”

Bumblebee gave a noncommittal shrug.

Ratchet nodded wisely. “Yes, humans can get annoying at times. I personally think it’s amazing that you’ve remained with Sam and Mikaela this long. But anyway,” he continued, ceasing the small talk, “we’re right through here.” He gestured at the hangar. “Optimus is co-ordinating a method of attack with the Australian Air Force.”

“They hope to stop it before it reaches the coast?” Arcee asked.

“Hope, yes, but they all know that’s incredibly unlikely. No, at this stage they’re planning to simply slow it down.”

“Even that won’t be much easier,” Elita frowned as they entered the hangar. Most of the other Autobots were there; Optimus, Jazz and Ironhide were conversing with several military men, presumably pilots, while the others were somewhere else in the hangar, hidden amongst the fighter jets the hangar housed. Crosshairs, Roadbuster and Topspin could be glimpsed through the sea of sleek, grey shapes, but the rest were completely hidden, as the F/A-18 jets were as tall as they were.

“Arcee, Chromia, Elita and Bumblebee are here,” Ratchet announced, when the conversation between the Autobots and the humans paused briefly, and immediately, the heads of Sideswipe, Mirage, Wheeljack and Leadfoot popped up from behind the jets’ fuselages as they attempted to get a look at the new arrivals. “They’ve just arrived from California.”

“Another one arrived on Earth, hey?” one of the pilots asked, nodding at Bumblebee. “Haven’t seen him before.”

Jazz and Chromia exchanged glances and promptly burst out laughing as Bumblebee scowled, and a few titters could be heard coming from the direction of the fighter jets as well. The man, realising he had made a mistake, looked down, cheeks burning, and quietly shuffled behind one of his friends, who was struggling to remain straight-faced himself.

“Bumblebee was the first Autobot on Earth, having arrived before myself and the others,” Optimus explained, his voice carrying a faint trace of amusement. “After the Decepticons were defeated, he remained with one of our human associates, where he has largely managed to avoid your media.”

“Right. Sorry,” the unfortunate pilot mumbled.

“Never mind him, he’s just a bit excited; we all are. It’s not every day the Autobots turn up on your front step.” A burly, red-headed man stepped forward and shook a bemused Arcee’s hand. Handshakes weren’t something she often received. “Captain Hercules Hansen of the Royal Australian Air Force,” he said with a thick Australian accent. “It’s been my pleasure to help plan
our method of attack against this kaiju creature with your fellow Autobots. It’s an honour to meet you, Arcee, Chromia, Elita-One, Bumblebee. Just wish it was in better circumstances.”

“We rarely ever meet humans in better circumstances,” Arcee replied drily. “It’s in our job description.”

“You said you had a plan?” Elita asked, shooting a glare at Arcee. They didn’t need more pessimism.

“That’s right,” Hansen nodded. “We’re gonna fly out to the kaiju’s current location in some F/A-18s and try to slow it down with tracer fire and a couple of missiles.”

“You think that’ll work?”

Hansen shrugged. “It’s the best we’ve got, and all we can do is try. The Americans are going to send over a bomber, so if we get the chance, we’ll use that as well.”

“Nuclear?” Arcee said sharply, narrowing her optics in suspicion.

“Captain Hansen has reassured me that a nuclear weapon will only be used if the creature is a safe distance off the Australian coast,” Optimus cut in. “If it will not harm any humans, then I have no objection to its use.”

“We’ll use it over the ocean - we’re not going to be like those folks up in Manila and nuke a major city,” Hansen said seriously. Arcee glared down at him and he sighed. “Look, we’ll use it as a last resort, okay? Who knows, it might even kill it and you won’t have to face it at all. But we are not going to use it on the city. My wife and kid are trying to evacuate now, and they’re the last people I want to put in harm's way.”

But Arcee just made a ‘tch’ noise and rolled into the maze of fighter jets. The memory of what the nuclear bomb in Manila had done was still fresh in her mind, and she was convinced that the use of another would only result in similar destruction.

“Did I say something?” Hansen asked, confused.

Elita watched Arcee roll away sadly, then shook her head. “No, you didn’t. She can be...touchy at times when it comes to powerful weapons like nuclear bombs.”

“Can’t say I blame her,” Hansen said understandingly. “Most humans are like that too.” He sighed again. “Anyway, we better be going. We don’t want the kaiju to get too close to the coast before we find it, especially if we have to use that bomb.”

Optimus nodded. “Good luck with your mission, Captain. We will let you know when we are in position.”

“Thanks,” Hansen said. “Time to head out guys,” he called, and strode off towards the fighter jets, the rest of the pilots following him.

“In position for what?” Chromia asked Optimus. “You haven’t told us what the plan is.”

“I’ll explain on the way, Chromia,” Optimus replied before announcing, “Autobots, time to leave.”

Within seconds, the remaining Autobots had emerged from the maze of F/A-18s.

“‘Bout time,” Crosshairs muttered. “I’ve been wandering around for ages, trying to find Sideswipe;
he blends in well.”

“Rubbish,” Sideswipe scoffed. “Mirage is the hard one to find, having that null-field cloaker.” He paused. “And he’s right behind me, isn’t he?”

Sure enough, the air behind Sideswipe shimmered, revealing the smirking form of Mirage. “Invisibility is fun,” he said as the Autobots exited the hangar.

~8~

“So, Optimus, where are we headed?” Arcee asked as the sixteen Autobots sped down the motorway, making a beeline for the glistening spires of Sydney’s CBD. Thanks to the city’s (ongoing) evacuation, the inbound motorway was deserted - but the outbound one was jammed full with cars making slow progress out of the city. Still, all things considered, it was a smooth evacuation for a city of five million people.

“The Royal Botanic Gardens,” Optimus answered. “Ratchet, Wheeljack and Jolt require a large open space, and the Gardens is the closest suitable area. However, I’d like you and your sisters to travel to the Harbour Bridge to keep an eye out for the monster and prevent it from destroying the Bridge if the need arises.”

“Sounds good.”

And so, after putting their nitro boosters to good use, the Autobots split up, with the sisters continuing north to the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge while the others pulled up at the Gardens. When they arrived, Ratchet, Wheeljack and Jolt wasted no time in setting up some sort of device right in the middle of the Gardens.

“You guys sure your thing’ll do whatever it’s supposed to do?” Jazz asked.

“Yes,” said Ratchet and Jolt, while Wheeljack said ‘no’.

Ratchet and Jolt glared at him.

“Well, in theory, yes,” Wheeljack corrected. “But with a creature this size, it could prove to be nothing but a poke in the leg.”

“What are you trying to anyway?” Roadbuster asked. “You do nae look like you’re doing anything!”

“We hope to depress its nervous system and induce a state of paresthesia in the monster’s legs, thus disrupting its sense of balance, which should result in a collision with the ground,” Wheeljack explained.

“He means ‘numb the legs and make it fall’,“ Ratchet clarified.

“But we could also paralyze it,” Jolt continued. “It doesn’t matter which, just as long as one method works.”

“Or both,” Ratchet said. “Now if you don’t mind, we need to be left in peace. This thing isn’t going to make itself, you know.”

“It’ll probably explode as soon as you turn it on,” Leadfoot muttered, and Jazz sniggered.

“Nah,” said Crosshairs, “It’s a joint effort. No chance of exploding, I reckon.”
“Do you want to find out?” Wheeljack asked pointedly. “Please, we need the quiet.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Crosshairs grumbled, but he and the others obliged and wandered over to Optimus and Ironhide.

“I want you and the Wreckers positioned on one of those apartment buildings,” Optimus was saying. “In the event that Ratchet, Jolt and Wheeljack are not ready in time, your firepower will hopefully delay the creature further.”

“What about the rest of us?” Crosshairs complained before Ironhide could respond. “Are we just going to stand around here looking pretty?”

“Funny you should say that,” Ironhide said, “because that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

Crosshairs frowned. What did he mean?

He found out soon after, and he didn’t like it one bit.

~8~

A couple of hours passed with no report from the RAAF. In a way, that was good news, as it meant that Ratchet, Wheeljack and Jolt had time to work on their device to take down the monster. On the other hand, not having any knowledge of what was going on off the coast didn’t make it easy for the Autobots to sit around and wait for something to happen. It was therefore a great relief when Optimus finally received an incoming call.

“Optimus Prime, sir, this is Captain Hercules Hansen.”

“Go ahead, Captain.”

“We located the creature at the co-ordinates your Autobots provided, and have slowed it down significantly. Are you in position?”

“Affirmative, Captain,” Optimus replied. “We are on standby in Sydney.”

“Well, you’re going to have a big kaiju monster on you in about half an hour. We tried nuking the bastard but all it did was make him angry, and he swam off towards the coast. He’s too close and travelling too fast for us to do anything else. You’re on your own.”

“I understand, Captain,” Optimus said. “I must thank you and your fellow pilots for your efforts. You can now return to the mainland; we will take it from here.”

“Roger that, Optimus Prime. Hansen out.”

Wasting no time, Optimus turned to Ratchet, Jolt and Wheeljack, who were still toiling away at the device they hoped would cripple the kaiju.

“Wheeljack, how long until you have finished?” he asked.

“Hard to say,” Wheeljack said, not looking up from his work. “We ran into a bit of trouble with the energon converters, so about...forty, forty five minutes.”

“You’ll have to work faster, my friend,” Optimus said worriedly. “Captain Hansen has just informed me that the creature should be at our position in thirty minutes.”

“Scrap,” cursed Jolt; there was a loud bang and wisps of smoke rose up from the device.
Ratchet glared at Wheeljack.

“Wasn’t me,” Wheeljack said defensively. “Honest.”

“Hmm,” snorted Ratchet, and went back to work.

Wheeljack, on the other hand, looked up thoughtfully, then reached behind his back and produced a small box.

“Prime,” he called.

“What is it, Wheeljack?” the Autobot leader said.

Wheeljack handed the box to him. “Just in case,” he said simply, and turned back to the device.

Optimus opened the box and looked down at the contents - a hundred or so football-sized rounds of ammunition. He recognised them immediately and frowned. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that. Nevertheless, he emptied the ammunition into a compartment in his arm, where internal processes would transport it to storage chambers within his body, compressing them to save space, only to expand them when - if - needed.

Sincerely hoping that they wouldn’t be needed, Optimus opened a comm. link to the rest of the Autobots.

“I have just been informed that the creature will be here in approximately thirty minutes. Keep a good look out, and let me know as soon as you see it,” he said. “May Primus be with us all.”

Not that far away, atop the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Arcee, Chromia and Elita-One received the message.

“Roger that, Optimus,” Arcee said, as she and her sisters settled down for the wait, staring out across the deserted Sydney Harbour.

Sure enough, twenty-eight minutes later, the otherwise calm waters of the harbour began to ripple, and with an angry roar, the fourth giant monster emerged from the depths, spraying water everywhere.

“Hey,” Chromia said, almost laughing. “It’s a one of those Australian lizards.”

She was right. In a twist of irony, the monstrous creature slowly stomping through Sydney Harbour did, to some extent, resemble a Frill-Necked Lizard found in the Australian Outback - a large frill adorned the monster’s neck, and its body tapered out into a thin tail. But the similarities ended there. Two giant, floppy ears extended from the head, and the creature also sported two thin membranes of skin that were attached to its arms and body; they looked worryingly like wings. However, one appeared to be damaged, with the membrane torn from the body and hanging uselessly from the arm. Further still, massive burns could be seen on the creature’s skin, stretching over its back, arms, and a significant portion of its legs. It looked like the RAAF’s attack had actually managed to deal considerable damage.

“They used that bomb…” Arcee said grimly, before opening a comm. link to Prime. “Optimus, the monster is here.”

“Yes, we can hear it from our position. Make sure it does not destroy the bridge!”

“Easier said than done,” Arcee muttered grimly, closing the link. “Alright, let’s make sure this
thing doesn’t destroy anything important.” Her right hand shifted into the form of a long, slender sniper rifle, a move that was mimicked moments later by Chromia and Elita. They would use their considerable sniping skills to take out one (or more, depending on the number) of the monster’s eyes in an effort to distract it from causing too much damage, or blundering off in the wrong direction. Unfortunately, it seemed as if they would have to do this almost immediately, as the great beast was wading through the bay, heading for the north side of the harbour - straight towards Kirribilli House, the currently deserted residence of Australia’s Prime Minister.

“Scrap,” growled Arcee. “Elita, you’ve got the better shot; take out one of its eyes.”

Elita nodded, narrowed her optics, aimed briefly, and fired. A sharp crack echoed across the harbour, and the creature recoiled in pain, clawing at its face with a burnt claw as it stumbled forward, setting foot on land, damaging Kirribilli House in the process.

Arcee cursed rather severely. The Australian Government would not be pleased about that.

Elita quickly let off another shot, and it seemed that this finally had the desired effect; the monster, now half blinded, let out another howl of pain, but turned its ugly head towards them and slowly began to stomp towards the bridge. They had successfully managed to get the creature’s attention, but now they needed to lose it again. The only problem was how.

“Oh, any ideas?” Chromia asked worriedly, as the monster came ever closer.

Suddenly, an explosion blossomed on the monster’s back, followed quickly by another. The creature roared in pain and turned to face this newest annoyance.

“Hey!” Jazz’s voice boomed across the harbour. “That bridge is eighty-two years old, and my friends on it are a billion, so watch where you’re going, you big ugly monster!”

Jazz was standing right in front of the iconic Sydney Opera House, and by adjusting her optics, Arcee could see that Mirage, Bumblebee, Crosshairs and Sideswipe stood behind him.

The creature growled and ambled off towards Jazz and co.

“Good luck, guys,” Arcee muttered. They’d need it.

Over at Bennelong Point, the five Autobots stared up at the hulking, injured mass of flesh looming above them.

“Okay, Jazz, you made him annoyed. Now we just need to make him angry,” Sideswipe said.

“Not too angry, mind you,” added Crosshairs, “just angry enough to follow us.”

“I, uh, don’t think I’ll need to do anything else,” Jazz said. “Looks like two shots did the trick.”

“So it did,” Crosshairs observed as the creature’s shadow fell over them. “Can we go yet?”

“Not just yet,” Jazz said. “Be ready.”

The monster snorted and raised its foot in preparation to crush them.

“NOW!” Jazz yelled, and the five of them turned and ran as fast as they could.

“That was too close!” Crosshairs shouted as the foot came crashing down behind them, leaving a deep impression in the pavement. “I’m outta here!”
A second foot slammed down into the tarmac just behind the green Autobot, sending him flying, but before he hit the ground, he quickly transformed and hit the road on his back tyres before speeding away. “I never liked this plan!” he shouted. “Ironhide, I’m gonna kill you when this is over!”

Mirage rolled his optics. “Of course he ignores the plan.”

“Can’t say I blame him,” Sideswipe said. He looked quickly over his shoulder. “I think it’s safe to transform now. That thing’s going to follow us no matter what. Jazz?”

“I’m with you, Sideswipe,” Jazz agreed. “Let’s show this monster some speed!”

He, Sideswipe, Mirage and Bumblebee all transformed and quickly accelerated, hoping to get some distance between them and the creature, which bellowed in anger before beginning to chase them, crashing through a section of the Opera House in the process.

“I don’t think it likes Opera, Jazz,” Bumblebee said as they sped down Macquarie Street.

Jazz checked the scene behind him and cringed. “Oops.”

“We can worry about that later,” Sideswipe said. “Let’s just get this thing to the Botanic Gardens.” He opened a comm. channel. “Ratchet, please tell me you’re ready.”

“That’s a negative, Sideswipe,” Ratchet replied, sounding very stressed. “We just need a few more minutes.”

“We don’t have a few more minutes!” Sideswipe said as the monster charged through an building. “Ironhide, Plan B!”

Standing atop a nearby apartment block, Ironhide and the Wreckers watched the monster chase their fellow Autobots down the road.

“With pleasure,” Ironhide said, nodding at the Wreckers.

“Wreckers, wreck ‘im,” Leadfoot called gleefully. As one, he, the other Wreckers and Ironhide began firing on the monster. The Wreckers used specially modified rockets they’d put together on the flight over, whilst Ironhide used his old favourite: penetrator missiles. Both types of projectiles slammed into the monster, stopping it in its tracks as it tried to fight off the onslaught of weaponry.

“Almost there...done!” Ratchet cried triumphantly. “Send it our way now!”

Immediately, Ironhide and the Wreckers ceased their fire, and Jazz loosened another missile in order to regain its attention and resume the chase.

But what happened next surprised everyone. Instead of following Jazz and co. once again, the creature darted forward, slamming into the building upon which Ironhide and the Wreckers stood. It was a Spark-stopping moment. Ironhide and the Wreckers disappeared behind a cloud of dust as the building crumbled underneath the immense weight of the creature, which withdrew a few metres, surveying the destruction it had caused.

The building’s collapse was easily visible from the Botanic Gardens, and Ratchet, Wheeljack, Jolt and Optimus stared in shock at the pile of rubble.

“You don’t think they’re...?” Wheeljack began.
No one answered him. The thought was too terrible to bear.

Optimus adjusted the focus on his optics and scanned the rubble, looking for any sign that Ironhide and the Wreckers had survived. There – a thick, black arm was sticking out, and the fingers were flexing.

“They’re alive,” Optimus confirmed, eliciting a ‘Thank the Maker’ from Ratchet. He continued to watch the rubble as Ironhide managed to climb out of the debris, looking none the worse for wear. The Wreckers too, were also freeing themselves. They would be all right.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, the creature’s foot smashed down, once again blocking Ironhide and the Wreckers from view. It remained stationary for several seconds, until, with a satisfied snarl, the creature withdrew once more to reveal the horrifying sight of Ironhide lying prone on the ground, his legs crushed to pulp. The Wreckers too, appeared to be significantly hurt, or worse. None of them were moving.

Optimus’ optics narrowed, and he looked right up at the creature. And then, inexplicably, it returned his gaze, snorting in triumph. Optimus’ optics widened, as, suddenly, it made sense; the creature knew what it had done – its actions were planned, thought out, not the product of some primal instinct. This creature was more intelligent than the others.

Memories of the previous attack flooded Optimus’ neural processors. Skids and Mudflap, two of his Autobots, had died in what appeared to be purely accidental circumstances. Nevertheless, the incident had proven that these giant creatures were capable of killing Cybertronians. And now this, where it was possible that another four had been fatally injured as the result of a planned attack... it could not continue. These creatures had to be stopped. They deserved no mercy.

Optimus snapped his faceplate shut. “I’m going in,” he said, and, not giving Ratchet time to object, he was off, charging towards the monster. He raised his right arm; metal shifted, the cybermatter that made up his body changed its molecular structure to the specifications Optimus desired. A few seconds later, Optimus was firing his signature ion blaster at the monster, which, upon contact, had a devastating effect. Each blast tore right through the monster’s flesh, and thanks to the gun’s very high rate of fire, it wasn’t long before the creature was roaring in pain, peppered with small, painful holes in its body.

But Optimus wasn’t even close to finished. Satisfied that the creature would be in too much pain to pay much attention to him, he jumped up onto the creature’s back leg, stabbing his left energon hook into the flesh. Replacing his ion blaster with a second hook, he began to scale the creature, barely pausing even as it twisted and turned in a desperate attempt to shake him off, having finally realised there was something crawling along its leg. Its attempts were in vain, and it wasn’t long before Optimus was running across its back. The creature was now more agitated than ever, but could do nothing as Optimus jumped over its head, twisted, and jammed an energon hook right into its face so that he dangled in front of its mouth.

The creature growled threateningly.

The energon hook loosened.

“Leave my friends, this planet and its people alone,” Optimus said fiercely, his spare hand rearranging itself into yet another new configuration. But this time, it was not the ion blaster that appeared, but the far more deadly barrage cannon. The ammo that Wheeljack had given him earlier - it was for this very gun, one of the more powerful pieces of Cybertronian weaponry, capable of severing Cybertronian limbs solely from the physical impact.
And that was without taking into account that fact that the projectiles were also nuclear explosives.

The creature raised its head, opened its mouth and extended its tongue, a long blue appendage that curled tightly around Optimus’ leg and pulled, nearly dislodging the energon hook. Realising that he didn’t have much time before he was pulled into the monster’s mouth, Optimus raised the barrage cannon, aimed briefly, and fired. Six warheads burst from the barrel in rapid succession and flew straight down the monster’s open throat, shredding straight through the gullet and continuing some distance into the body before exploding, severing a major artery in the process. These were quickly followed by several dozen more in less than five seconds, the cumulative effect of which completely destroyed the creature’s internal organs.

With an anguished howl, the creature swayed where it stood, its tongue flopping limply, Optimus still held tightly at the end, the energon hook having been finally dislodged. A quick swing of an energon sword and the tongue was severed, sending Optimus plummeting eighty metres to the ground, which he landed on with a thud. The creature hit the ground close by a few seconds later. There was a searing pain in his left shoulder, a familiar sensation that alerted him to the fact that had just lost functionality of his left arm. But that was unimportant. What mattered most was that the creature had been defeated, that the threat was over...for now.
Chapter Summary

Before the devastation of the first kaiju attack, the Top Gear team landed a major scoop by featuring some of the Autobots on the popular tv show...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Tonight, Jeremy gets terrified, Richard gets incredibly disappointed, and James has the best conversation of his life.

TOP GEAR

“Hello, and welcome to the show,” Jeremy Clarkson called out as the studio audience cheered and applauded. “And a very special show it is indeed. Now, as you all know, a few years ago it turned out all those conspiracy theorists were right - aliens did exist. It was quite a shock to tell the truth, and an even bigger shock to learn that these aliens could turn into cars - quite possibly the coolest and most practical ability ever in the history of the universe.”

The audience laughed.

“Quite so,” Richard Hammond continued. “And realising this, our producers have been trying to get them on the programme for some time. But they haven’t managed to succeed - until now.”

“Yes,” James May added. “The transforming robots from outer space flew over from their base in Washington DC to spend some time in Britain, that little island off Europe that no alien except Doctor Who seems to care about, where they spent a day with us performing some challenges.”

~8~

It was a crisp, clear morning at the Dunsfold Aerodrome as Jeremy, Richard and James stood at the start line of the Top Gear Test Track, waiting eagerly for the arrival of their extraterrestrial guests. Rather unusually, there were no cars in sight.

“As you may have noticed,” Jeremy said, “we are the first to arrive, and you’re probably sitting at home thinking ‘oh look, they’ve gone and done it wrong; they haven’t got any cars’. Well, we don’t actually need any cars today, as I’ve been reliably informed that they’ll be arriving here - by themselves - at any moment.”

“Well, not actually cars,” James corrected. “More like highly advanced alien beings from a distant planet who have evolved the ability to transform into any mechanical object relative to their size, thus allowing them to take the form of cars.”

Jeremy and Richard rolled their eyes.

“Yes, thank you James, for the explanation of something I’m sure everyone already knows,” Richard said exasperatedly. “Unless the people at home have been living in a hole for the last five and a half years, I’m pretty sure they know what the Autobots are.”
“I’m just providing some background information,” James said, annoyed.

“Guys, I think they’re here,” Jeremy said suddenly, pointing down the other end of the runway. Six car-shaped hazes had appeared on the horizon at the far end of the aerodrome’s runway.

“Excellent,” James said excitedly.

“Do we, uh, know which ones are coming?” Richard asked rather nervously.

Jeremy shook his head. “The producers, in their infinite wisdom, decided it would be a nice surprise.”

“I hope we don’t get that big black one or the fat one,” Richard said. “They look dangerous.”

“They’re all dangerous,” James pointed out, “even the ones that turn into motorbikes could snap you in two if they wanted. At least, according to my calculations.”


“Well, I calculated the minimum force they could exert by referring to video footage of them lifting heavy slabs of concrete and other materials during their rescues,” James answered.

“And the why?”

“Because they’re robots that turn into cars!” James said, as if it were obvious. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“You need to get a life, mate,” Richard remarked, just as Jeremy made a small yelp of horror.

“That’s a Pontiac Solstice!” he said, wide-eyed, pointing out across the tarmac. The six shapes were much closer now, and it was possible to discern the brand of the car that the Autobots had chosen to assume.

James frowned and squinted. “Yes it is,” he confirmed a second later.

“But Hammond loves them!”

“Yes, yes I do,” Richard agreed, rather smugly. “Hang on though, what’s that one?”

He was pointing at a sleek silver car of a design none of the presenters had ever seen before. From a front-on perspective, at least, it appeared very futuristic.

“Must be some sort of alien car,” James theorised, “because it doesn’t resemble anything I can think of.”

“In that case, it doesn’t matter; boring,” Jeremy said immediately. “Moving on...the silver car next to the weird one is a convertible...a Corvette? You gotta be joking!”

“Is that another Corvette, too? The green one?” James asked.

“I don’t believe it,” Jeremy said in despair, “I can’t actually believe what I’m seeing.”

But what he was seeing was the truth. Sixteen of the twenty Autobots on Earth had taken American vehicles as their vehicle mode, and it just so happened that three of the sixteen had volunteered to be on the programme. For Jeremy, of course, that was three too many.
“This is bloody ridiculous,” he grumbled. “Absolutely ridiculous.”

“Well, you know, it just goes to show that American cars are actually very good,” Richard said smugly. “I hope that knowing that extraterrestrial robots pick muscle cars will finally convince you that –”

“Oh, Hammond, shut up, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jeremy interrupted. “They’ve only chosen those big fat things because they haven’t been exposed to the class and elegance of the European car manufacturers. It’s obvious.”

“Except they have,” Richard pointed out. “That’s a Ferrari…458 Italia over there as well, along with a Bugatti, so clearly they’re aware of other manufacturers, but have decided that the general coolness and specs of the muscle car better suits their needs.”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t really care about what car they’ve decided to be,” James said, before Jeremy could argue. “What I’m fascinated about is their ability to transform, and move from car to robot in seconds. The technology behind that has to be incredible, not to mention the fact that they’ve solved the balance problem for bipedal robots that has eluded us humans for decades. You see …”

James continued to waffle on about human robotics and how it compared to the superior alien technology for quite some time. In fact, he was so immersed in his monologue that Jeremy had to break him out of it once the Autobots pulled up.

“Um, James, you know that they’re here, right?” Jeremy asked.

James blinked. “Oh,” he said, and stared at the six cars parked in front of them.

Unsurprisingly, all three presenters were rather unsure of just how to proceed.

“So we just say hello?” Jeremy whispered.

“Yeah, it’s just like talking to your car at home,” Richard said. “Oh, don’t say you haven’t done it, we know you have.”

Jeremy shuffled up to the Pontiac. “I feel quite nervous, actually, knowing that the car can talk back.” He cleared his throat. “Um…hi?”

Nothing happened.

James and Richard burst out laughing.


“This is the first non-news television programme in the world to feature real aliens, and the first thing you say is ‘um…hi’,” James chortled.

“Way to go mate, you’re a leading expert in interspecies communications,” Richard added, grinning.

Fortunately, Jeremy was spared the continued mockery of his colleagues when the Autobots actually responded.

“Bah weep graaaaagnah wheep nini bong,” the Pontiac said.

All three humans frowned.
“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” James asked.

“I thought they could speak English?” Richard said.

“Any language, apparently…”

“It was the Universal Greeting,” the Pontiac said out loud, shocking the presenters. “It’s meant to express good will towards alien beings.”

“Oh my god, the car just spoke,” Jeremy said, looking at the Pontiac in disbelief. “I have waited literally my whole life for that to happen.”

“Well of course it spoke, it’s a ruddy alien,” James said.

“But it’s a car!”

And then the Autobots finally transformed, the cars breaking apart into thousands of tiny pieces that rearranged themselves into an entirely different order, until, only a few seconds later, six figures loomed over the awestruck presenters. They were cars no longer, but tall, bipedal robots.

“That is literally the most amazing thing I have ever seen,” James said wondrously. Jeremy and Richard could only nod silently in agreement.

It was the Pontiac who spoke first - though of course he didn’t look like a Pontiac anymore.

“My name’s Jazz,” he said. “This is Sideswipe (he pointed to the Autobot who had been the silver Corvette), Mirage (the Ferrari), Crosshairs (the green Corvette), Drift (the Bugatti) and Wheeljack (the sports car they hadn’t recognised).”

“Right…” Richard said slowly. “Um…hi?”

“So much for interspecies communication,” Jeremy muttered.

“Hello,” the Autobots replied.

There was an awkward silence, before the one called Wheeljack stepped forward.

“You were wondering, I believe, why the majority of us chose American cars as our alternate modes?”

“Yes,” James said, slightly bewildered. “How’d you know?”

The green one - Crosshairs - grinned. “Sensitive ears,” he said slyly. “We could hear a gasket drop from twenty klicks away.”

“And has someone dropped a gasket twenty kilometres away?” Richard asked innocently.

Crosshairs scowled and opened his mouth to retort, but Wheeljack spoke before he could do so.

“Anyway,” he said hastily, “to explain the alternate mode situation...Well, you see, we picked most of our original alternate modes to blend in, and since most of us landed in the United States, we picked American cars as our disguise. Kind of hard to blend in when you’re a... let’s say, Ferrari, or an F1 racer, or anything like that.”

“That didn’t stop them,” James said, pointing at Mirage and Drift.
“There are exceptions,” Wheeljack admitted.

“Why do you need to blend in anyway?” Richard asked. “Isn’t your whole point to go out rescuing people?”

“Well, yes, but originally we had to hide…”

“Actually, I can’t remember a time when you had to hide at all,” Jeremy said. “There was that big battle, and then you helped clean up, and then the United Nations decided you could stay…”

“Yes, but we weren’t sure…” Wheeljack was struggling to keep the conversation under control, and he glanced helplessly at his fellow Autobots, hoping they would come to his aide. Unfortunately for him, they did not.

“Don’t listen to him,” Sideswipe said. “He’s just giving the standard ‘robots in disguise’ talk we’re all supposed to give to every intelligent species we come across.”

“The real reason why we chose our vehicle modes was because we liked the look of the car,” Jazz explained. “If we get tired of it, we change it.”

“Jackie’s hardly qualified to give a talk about disguise anyway,” Crosshairs added. “He hasn’t even disguised himself at all! Still got a Cybertronian alt-mode. A standard racer model too, I might add.”

“It is not standard,” Wheeljack huffed. “I designed it myself!”

“No, Perceptor did, after your prototype miniature blew up,” Mirage said snidely. “Just like everything you build does.”

“Hang on - ‘racer model’? Did your civilisation have a sort of organised motorsports?” Richard asked interestedly.

“We are cars…” Drift quipped.

“Yeah, we did,” Crosshairs answered. “Of course, we haven’t had time to actually run the events for a couple billion years, but back in the Golden Age, they were all the range. Even had a whole damn planet devoted to it.”

“Velocitron…” Jazz began, reminiscing. “An old colony world, home to some of the fastest Cybertronians alive. You guys’d love it - an entire planet built up for the sole purpose of racing, with tracks and roads covering the entire surface. If you lived there, you cared only for racing. It was amazing.”

“Yeah,” Sideswipe agreed. “Tracks and roads across countless conditions. Cold, hot, dynamic, static, electric, windy… If you can think of it, Velocitron had it somewhere.”

“Wasn’t even the most famous part,” Mirage added.

“Nope,” Jazz laughed. “Most famous part of the planet was the Grand Road, a massive orbital ring that circled the planet - one giant, circular track. No twists, no turns, just a straight, infinite road. See, since it was in orbit, there was no atmosphere, so you don’t have to worry about things like wind friction. It was just you, the other racers, and the road. You could accelerate as much as you wanted, go as fast as you liked. We reached some crazy speeds on that road, let me tell you.”

“Who was the fastest?” Jeremy asked eagerly.
Jazz frowned. "She was so fast that we never caught her name," he said. "So all I know is that she’s not the Stig, she’s the Stig’s Cybertronian cousin!" He grinned as James, Jeremy and Richard chuckled at the joke.

"It was Override," Crosshairs coughed loudly, drawing a sharp glare from Jazz, but the humans appeared not to have heard.

"I’ll have to ask the Stig why he’s never mentioned that he’s got an alien cousin," Jeremy said seriously. "It was on his contract that he told us of any racing relations he has."

"Any chance we could get her on the show?" Richard asked.

"Nope," Sideswipe answered. "This was all a few billion years ago; we’ve got no idea where she is now."

"I have a question, if you don’t mind," James said suddenly. "What exactly are you all made of? Because it’s quite remarkable that you’re able to take the form of all the different materials in a car - rubber, leather, steel, anything."

"You don’t need to answer that one," said Jeremy hastily. "I’m sure it’ll just be boring -"

"No, no, no, I’ll answer it," Wheeljack said happily.

"Here we go," said Crosshairs, rolling his optics.

"All Cybertronians," Wheeljack began, "in fact, everything Cybertronian, is made out of a substance known as Cybermatter. Despite the...uncreative name, it is both a very useful and very unique substance."

He held his arm out, his hand open wide. "Cybermatter has the capacity to alter its molecular properties, alongside its appearance and its shape." Wheeljack’s index finger glowed for a moment, before it separated into multiple different strands, each one moving independently apart. "Functionally, this means that so long as Cybermatter has a supply of energy, it is capable of doing just about anything."

The strands that made up his finger promptly recombined, save for a single one, which formed into a sphere the size of a golf ball.

"For example," Wheeljack continued, holding the ball between two fingers, "this ball is solid, but when I give a little bit of energy..."

The ball suddenly ballooned out, growing nearly to the size of a softball.

"With the energy I supplied, I was able to make it grow in size, as you can see. What you can’t see, however, is the fact that this ball is now hollow, and has a complete vacuum on the inside."

Wheeljack turned his hand over, his palm facing upwards. He let go of the ball, and to the surprise of everybody watching, it began floating upwards.

"I also changed it’s atomic mass," Wheeljack said. "The ball is now actually buoyant enough to float in the air that surrounds it."

"That’s amazing..." James breathed.

"It’s fun," Wheeljack admitted. "It won’t remain that way for much longer, but it’s fun."
James frowned, but was prevented from asking anything when a loud screeching noise heralded the ball imploding, and falling back downwards. Wheeljack caught it before it could land on the ground. “But because I decreased the mass, I had to increase the durability and hardness of it, so that it wouldn’t immediately implode from the vacuum. Such changes, both to the durability and the mass, require energy to maintain, and when that energy ran out…” Wheeljack held up the ball, showing how it was ruined.

He smirked, and the ball gained a blue glow before slowly shifting back into its previous golf-ball-sized form.

“It’s the same thing that we do when we transform, just applied in a different way,” Wheeljack continued. “Making Cybermatter take on the appearance and properties of rubber, for example.”

He dropped the ball, which bounced off the floor, nearly as high as it had been dropped from.

Twice more it bounced, before, with a metallic thunk, it stopped.

Wheeljack chuckled a bit, holding his hand up. The ball emitted five pulses of sound, and was promptly yanked into the air, levitating above Wheeljack’s palm.

A second later, and it dropped, Wheeljack catching it again.

“Cybermatter,” he stated, the ball sinking back into his finger. “Very fun stuff.”

“James, you alright?” Jeremy asked worriedly. James was staring, transfixed, at Wheeljack’s finger. “No, no, I’m fine,” he said absently. “It’s just…wow. That is the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. I know I keep saying that today, but seriously, everything about you Autobots is simply fascinating.”

“Err, yes, right,” Jeremy said awkwardly. “Now that you’ve had the best conversation of your life, I have a much more important question: who here is the fastest?”

The Autobots looked thoughtfully at each other.

“Definitely not me,” Wheeljack said quickly.

“Nor me,” added Jazz. “I’m cool, not fast.”

“It’s obvious, innit?” Crosshairs boasted. “I’m the fastest one here; I could beat any of these suckers any day!”

“If we’d just had our tailpipes kicked by some Decepticons,” Sideswipe said indignantly. “You just look fast.”

“I think we would have to call it a tie between myself and Mirage and Sideswipe,” Drift stated. “But we have not raced for many years, so it would be interesting to see who would win now.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll have the chance to find out later today,” Jeremy said. “Now, though, it looks like we’ve got a challenge.

A producer strolled up to the group and handed Richard an envelope, who tore it open and took out the gold card contained within.

“Before the Autobots arrived in England, you were asked to compile a list of cars that would be suitable candidates for their vehicles modes. You will now attempt to persuade your chosen
Autobot to make your suggestions permanent replacements. The fact that their vehicle modes are primarily American muscle cars should give you an extra incentive to succeed.”

“Pff, how hard can that be?” Jeremy scoffed. “Just show them the vastly superior European car, and they won’t be able to swap fast enough.”

“Yeah, no,” Richard said bluntly. “If they wanted to be a European car, they would have become one by now.”

“And that’s precisely where you’re wrong,” Jeremy said immediately, “as you’ll know when you see the green one driving around the track as an Aston Martin.”

“You’re not going to get him to be an Aston,” scoffed James. “Look at him. He doesn’t want an Aston! They’re too classy.”

“We’ll see who’s laughing at the end, shall we?” Jeremy said confidently.

“Uh,” Richard said timidly. “I feel like I should point out that I didn’t actually choose any European cars…”

Jeremy let out an exasperated sigh. “You idiot. What did you get?”

“Porsches...all Porsches…”

“Of course you did.”

~8~

Forty minutes later, three separate groups of cars had been set up along the track, with one presenter standing in front of each, attempting to persuade either Jazz, Crosshairs or Sideswipe to adopt chosen cars as their altmode. A marketing pitch to Drift and Mirage had been deemed unnecessary, as they already had European altmodes, and Wheeljack had declined to participate, saying that he wouldn’t be swapping his Cybertronian car for anything, no matter how hard the presenters tried to sway him.

Richard was trying his luck with Jazz.

“Porsche?” Jazz asked.

“Yeah,” Richard nodded. “It’s the best car in the world, fast, excellent handling, and...comfortable? I don’t know, do you guys find cars to be comfortable, being the car and all?”

Jazz paused thoughtfully. “I suppose,” he said. “Never really thought about it before. Now, let’s try it out, shall we?” Blue light shot from his optics, scanning the Porsche, following every curve, every contour. A moment later, the light abruptly ceased, and Richard gaped up at Jazz as his form shifted, reformatting into a shape that was easily identifiable as him, but also was recognisably made up of Porsche 911 parts instead of pieces from the Pontiac Solstice.

“Hey,” Jazz said appreciatively. “It is pretty comfortable.”

“Will you keep it?” Richard asked immediately, looking hopeful. “I mean, you don’t have to, but it would be nice to have - to have an Autobot who turns into a Porsche…”

Jazz shrugged. “No, probably not,” he admitted. “I’m used to the other one. It looks cooler, too,” he added.
“Oh,” Richard said, and he looked down at the ground, incredibly disappointed.

Jeremy wasn’t having much luck with Crosshairs either.

“Look, it’s a good car!” he tried to explain, gesturing at the squeaky-clean Aston Martin V12 Vantage. “It’s much better than the monstrosity that you’re currently using.”

Crosshairs looked down at the car and sniffed. “Nah,” he said. “My current one looks better.”

“No it doesn’t!” Jeremy spluttered indignantly. “It’s absolutely beautiful, and when you consider that it’s also -”

“Hey, do you think I care about what the car’s capable of?” Crosshairs interrupted. “We don’t actually keep the specs of the cars we base or vehicle modes on! They’re crap compared to what we can make ourselves! Crap!”

Jeremy blinked in surprise. “So you just choose cars on looks?”


“Then become the Vantage!” Jeremy said again. “Look at it, it looks great! How can you say no to it?”

“Very easily,” Crosshairs said dismissively. “And I don’t like the look of any of the other cars you’ve got lined up there either,” he added. “I’ve always been a stickler for my first altmode on any planet. I ain’t changin’.”

Jeremy humphed, upset, and looked over at James, hoping to get some satisfaction with the fact that his fellow presenter wasn’t having any more luck than he was. Unfortunately for him, that wasn’t the case.

“I don’t believe it!” he cried incredulously, eyes wide.

“What?” said Richard, tearing himself away from Jazz (who immediately reverted back to his usual form) and hurrying over.

“Look!” Jeremy pointed out across the track, where a silver Lamborghini was zooming up and down the runway.

“No!”

“I can’t understand this,” Jeremy said despairingly. “James managed to get an Autobot to be a Lamborghini? James?”

That was indeed the case. James had presented Sideswipe with a selection of cars, and the Autobot had taken to a Lamborghini Gallardo immediately, scanning it in as his vehicle mode and taking it out for a test drive.

Needless to say, James was incredibly smug about it.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said, grinning broadly as he swaggered up to them. “I present to you a lesson in how to succeed in marketing to giant alien robots.”

“But - how?” Jeremy spluttered.

“I did my research,” James said simply.
“We all did,” Richard said.

“Ah, yes, but you see, I actually went a step further on contacted one of the Autobots’ liaison officers. I asked them what all of the Autobots behaved like, what their personal preferences for stuff was. I then compiled my list on their personality traits. I had about four different cars for every Autobot - even the ones that didn’t come.”

Jeremy shook his head. “You’re unbelievable, you are,” he said in disbelief.

“What did you have down for Jazz?” Richard asked tentatively.

James frowned. “Funny you should mention that,” he said, “because, from memory, I think a Porsche was on the list actually...a Porsche 935.”

“Not the 911?”

“No.”

“Damn,” Richard groaned. But it was too late; he’d blown his chance.

~8~

Back in the studio, James, Richard and Jeremy stood around the Lamborghini Gallardo as the audience cheered and whooped.

“I still don’t know how you got him to do it,” Jeremy confessed. “You must be an alien yourself.”

“Nonsense,” James said. “I just did things sensibly.”

“Yeah, but here’s the thing,” said Richard, grinning. “Did the Autobot stay as a Lambo?”

James sighed. “Well, no.”

“Exactly, so, you didn’t win.”

“Well, neither did yours,” James retorted, “so I don’t see what you can claim -”

“Gentlemen, please,” interrupted Jeremy. “I believe that my Autobot was the only one not to revert back to its original vehicle mode, therefore, I won the challenge.”

“Only because your Autobot didn’t even become your car in the first place!” Richard said. “You can’t win, because you never even got anywhere!”

“Just ask the Autobot, he’ll agree with me,” Jeremy said dismissively. He cleared his throat. “Right, now it’s time to put a star - or in this case, stars, in our reasonably priced car. No, they’re not the Autobots, but they are two people who have worked very closely with them right from the very beginning. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome here tonight, Major William Lennox and Sergeant Robert Epps!”

The crowd applauded loudly as two men stepped onto the platform in the centre of the studio. The first, Lennox, was rather tall and athletic, with neat dark brown hair. Epps, on the other hand, was slightly shorter but much more stockier, and gave the impression of someone who worked out often. He was also bald, allowing the studio lights to reflect off his dark scalp. Both men wearing smart, military-style uniforms, with the Autobot logo embroidered on the breast pocket.

“Welcome,” Jeremy greeting, joining them on the platform and shaking their hands. “Please, take a
Lennox and Epps sank down on a couch as Jeremy relaxed into a comfy chair.

“Firstly,” he began, “I’ve gotta ask - what’s it like working with the Autobots?”

“Best job in the world, man,” Epps said immediately, and Lennox nodded in agreement. “They’re the best. Never woulda thought that a bunch of alien robots would be my best friends, but they are.”

“Yeah,” Lennox said. “It’s just been really great working with them over the past six years. A privilege, it’s been a privilege.”

“That’s excellent to hear,” Jeremy said. “Now, I’m going to ask this now, and it’s probably the most important question in this entire interview. Why, why, why did you let the Autobots have American altmodes?”

Lennox laughed. “We don’t have choice in that,” he said. “They just choose what vehicles they want as they please. I’m just thankful they haven’t chosen anything truly horrible yet.”

“Ah, yeah, we’re going to differ in opinion there,” Jeremy said, with a sardonic grin. “as I’m sure you heard in that last segment. It’s just a fact: American cars are absolute rubbish.

“But anyway,” he continued. “We could prattle on about sentient cars all day, but we’re not interviewing them, we’re interviewing you. So, gentlemen, I hear that you both have been into cars for quite a few years now?”

“Yeah, I spose,” Epps answered with a shrug. “Not that it’s a surprise, working with the Autobots and all.”

“They kinda make you interested in it all,” Lennox added, “not that it’s any good. They may look like cars, but they’re about as far as possible from the real thing as you can imagine. They don’t need fuel, for instance, so the engine’s there just for show.”

“They don’t use anything?” Jeremy asked, surprised. “So they don’t emit any pollutants?”

“Nope,” Epps confirmed. “They’re greener than the greenest car made by man. Doesn’t stop us from getting some silly phone calls, though.”

“People actually ring you up and complain?” Jeremy said incredulously. “What a waste of time.”

“We get protests too, actually,” Lennox continued. “Every few months or so, we’ll drive out and see a group of people standing outside our base, waving signs around. We’ve given up trying to tell them; they just won’t listen.”

“I can imagine,” Jeremy agreed. “But there you go: Top Gear Top Tip: if you don’t want to pollute the environment while driving, buy a sentient car from outer space.”

The audience laughed.

“And look at that, we’ve got distracted again. I have a hunch this is going to keep happening,” Jeremy sighed. “Anyway, where were we? Cars - your car history?”

“Nothing too special,” Lennox said, glancing at Epps. “We’ve both got pickups - nice and practical, I suppose. No need for extravagance when you work with sports cars all day.”
“I would’ve thought the extravagance would have rubbed off on you, actually,” Jeremy remarked. “That’s if you can afford…?”

“Yeah, salary’s not that great,” Epps admitted. “We’re technically on a government wage...can’t afford to buy anything too fancy. But like Lennox said, we don’t need to. We wanna ride in a Ferrari, all we have to do is ask.”

“And they let you?” Jeremy said. “You just walk up to them and say ‘hey, would you like to drive me around because you’re a Ferrari and I’d look cool sitting in you?’”

“Not like that,” Lennox said, grinning. “But yeah, that is pretty much what we say.”

“And do they tell you to shove off, or something?”

“Mirage does, generally,” Lennox said. “So we don’t get the ride in the Ferrari. It’s usually Sideswipe and Jazz who say yes.”

“And they’re American cars, yeah?” Jeremy asked. Lennox and Epps nodded. “Yeah, not worth it at all.”

He paused briefly.

“Now, normally we’d ask you to do a lap in our Reasonably Priced Car,” he said, “but it seems to have mysteriously disappeared last week, so I’m afraid that we haven’t got anything for you to do..”

“Nah man, we’ll just drive one of the Autobots,” Epps said.

“Well, no,” Jeremy said. “You see, that kinda defeats the purpose of ‘reasonably priced’. An alien supercar is about as far from reasonably priced as you can get!”

“Can’t you make an exception?” Lennox asked.

“Fortunately, yes we can. The producers decided that instead of having two boring old humans go round our track, we’d have an Autobot do it instead.”

“Who’d you get?”

“The Ferrari.”

“Mirage,” Epps corrected.

“Yeah, him, the 458. And since we put the Stig in the 458 a couple of years ago and got a time of…1:19.1...we thought it’d be interesting to see if an alien 458 could beat that time.”

“Why didn’t you see if Drift could beat the Bugatti you’ve got there at 1:16 or so?” Lennox said.

“We were going to, but then the rest of them told us he could turn into a helicopter as well, so we decided we couldn’t risk it. Is it true, though, can he actually turn into a helicopter as well?”

“Yeah,” Lennox said, grinning.

“Blimey,” Jeremy said in amazement. “Anyway, who would like to see...Mirage? - Mirage’s lap?”

The audience cheered loudly.
Lennox, Epps and Jeremy looked down at the tv monitor next to the couches, which showed the familiar red Ferrari 458 Italia sitting at the starting line of the Top Gear Test Track. A second later, though, the tyres squealed, and Mirage accelerated forwards.

“And he’s off!” Jeremy called out, providing his usual commentary. “I would say that the fantastic start is thanks to the launch control that your normal 458 has, but considering that this is an alien robot, I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s something else entirely. Wow, absolutely guns it through the first corner, not even braking at all, yet somehow managing to stay on the track.”

The camera cut to the inside view, where there was nothing but an empty driver’s seat, with the steering wheel moving eerily by itself. Accompanying this was what could only be described as music playing on the radio - a loud, obnoxious sound that wasn’t particularly pleasant to human ears.

“As you can see, there is no one at all in this car - it’s quite unnerving to tell the truth. And, oh god, what on earth is that playing on the radio?”

“Some of their Cybertronian music,” Epps grimaced. “‘Shock Pop’, they call it.”

“Remind me to never make fun of the Stig’s music selections in the future,” Jeremy said seriously. “Err, right, coming up to the Hammerhead now, this is where things could go wrong...but no, goes through without a hitch despite the crazy speeds he’s going at. Follow-through now...,” he said as Mirage whizzed down the track. “Holy *beep*,” he practically shouted as Mirage roared past the tyres close enough to dislodge one from the stack. “Just how fast can he go?”

“Oh, most of them can break the sound barrier if they really try,” Lennox said casually. “He’s definitely not going his top speed here, that’s for sure.”

Jeremy’s mouth dropped open, speechless, all thought of commentary forgotten as Mirage rounded the second-to-last corner, completed Gambon on all four wheels, and finished in style by transforming and doing a roll over the checkered line.

The audience’s cheering and applause eventually brought Jeremy back to his senses.

“That’s mental,” he said, shaking his head in amazement. “The speed of sound? Wow.”

Lennox shrugged. “You get used to it when you work with them so much,” he said. “But yeah, it is pretty amazing.”

“Telling me,” Jeremy agreed. “Now, I have here the lap time.” He glanced at the board. “Where do you think your Autobot came?”

Lennox and Epps leant forwards, checking the lap times of the plethora of other cars.

“I don’t want to sound too confident,” Epps said, “but I reckon he’s beaten the fastest time.”

“1:13.8 by the Pagani Huayra?”

“Yeah,” Epps nodded.

Jeremy looked down at the time and started laughing. “I’m not going to beat around the bush,” he declared. “Because, ladies and gentlemen, with a time of fifty-four point seven seconds, we have a new record time here at the Top Gear Track!”
The level of applause that thundered through the studio was absolutely tremendous, and it took a minute for the noise levels to be quiet enough for James to speak.

“Now, earlier in the programme, when we met the Autobots for the first time, we wondered which of them was the fastest,” he said.

“Yes, but the producers were stupid and gave us another challenge instead,” Richard added. “Thankfully, after we completely failed that one, they decided to give us something else to do…”

~8~

A few hours after the ‘car sales challenge’, the humans and Autobots stood together at the track’s start line.

“Ah, here we go,” Richard said, spotting a producer as she walked over to them.

“Thanks,” James muttered, taking the envelope and tearing it open. “Earlier, the Autobots expressed interest in a race to see which of them is the fastest,” he read out loud. “Now, you get the opportunity to see for yourselves. The Autobots will now complete ten laps of the track - with you along for the ride.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Jeremy said. “It’s just a race.”

“Just a race’ can mean a lot of things to us,” Jazz said. “It’s not going to be that simple.”

“Nup,” Crosshairs said, grinning sadistically. “By the end of the ten laps, you’re gonna be crying to your parents.”

Ten minutes later, all six Autobots were positioned behind the start line, ready to begin the race. James, Jeremy and Richard had each chosen an Autobot in which they would ride for the duration of the race.

“As you can see,” Jeremy said, “I have chosen to join the Bugatti for the race, simply because he’s a nice example of what a car should be. Richard, unsurprisingly, has decided to be a traitor, and is with the silver Corvette - Sideways, or Sideswiped, whatever his name was -”

“Sideswipe,” Drift corrected.

“Yeah, him. James, also unsurprisingly, has decided to go with that scientist robot, where they’ll undoubtedly talk about boring science stuff that no one really cares about.”

Sure enough:

“This ‘Velocitron’ you mentioned earlier, is it possible we could visit?” James asked.

“No,” Wheeljack said bluntly. “It’s on the other side of the galaxy, but to get there you’d have to fix the old Space Bridge Network - well, whatever’s left of it.”

“Space bridge?”

“Faster-than-light travel via Transwarp, which is the nothingness between the universal streams that make up the multiverse…” Wheeljack explained.

James was too shocked to speak; the thought of interdimensional travel momentarily robbing him of sophisticated cognitive processes.
One of the producers walked up to the start line. “Three, two, one, go!” he called out, waving a green flag.

As one, the Autobots roared to life, rapidly accelerating, leaving the start line - and Wheeljack - far behind.

“Oh, cock,” James swore.

“Sorry,” Wheeljack apologised. “Compared to your usual Earth car, I’m fast, but against these guys...I don’t have a chance.”

James sighed and stared unhappily at the receding forms of the other Autobots.

Jeremy was simply delighted at this turn of events.

“Captain Slow seems to have found his Autobot equivalent,” he laughed. “We won’t have to bother about him, he’ll be dead last, if he even manages to finish.”

The first five laps were largely uneventful, with the Autobots staying in the same order throughout - Richard and Sideswipe in first, followed closely by Mirage, with Jeremy and Drift coming in at third. Crosshairs and Jazz were tied for fourth, with Wheeljack languishing some distance behind.

However, at the start of the fifth lap, Crosshairs made a move.

“What’s he doing?” Jeremy asked, looking out his window to see the green Corvette sidle past.

“Overtaking us,” Drift observed.

“Ram him, we can’t let him do that!”

“No, we must have patience,” Drift said calmly. “Let him overtake us.”

And they did, but it wasn’t long before the green Autobot made a move on Mirage and Sideswipe as well. One minute he was right behind Mirage, the next, he was flying past him, flames streaking from his exhaust pipes.

“Hey!” Mirage called. “No turbo boosters!”

But Crosshairs ignored him, instead choosing to transform and take a giant leap over Sideswipe as well.

Richard looked up in awe as one and a half tonnes of metal passed overhead, winked at him, then landed in front, transforming back into car mode and taking the lead.

“Scrap!” Sideswipe shouted angrily. “The cheat!”

But Crosshairs simply laughed and sped down the follow-through.

“Right, I’m not letting him win,” Sideswipe huffed. “Hold on!”

“Wait, what?” Richard said in alarm. Then, with an immense jolt, he found himself pressed backwards into his seat, experiencing a burst of acceleration that he knew wouldn’t have come from a regular Corvette. A second later, Sideswipe had drawn alongside Crosshairs.

“No cheater will win this race,” Sideswipe said determinedly, and swerved sideways into the green Autobot.
“Playing dirty, are we?” Crosshairs said, and rammed Sideswipe back, jolting Richard around the inside in the process.

“I hope this doesn’t get too serious,” Richard said, wincing.

Back in Drift, Jeremy was starting to panic.

“We can’t let either of them win; they’re muscle cars!” he declared as Sideswipe and Crosshairs jostled for first position. “We need to show Hammond and the rest of the Autobots that European cars are the only cars worth anything.”

“Patience,” Drift said calmly. “We shall wait until the last minute, when their guard will be lowered.”

“And then what?”

“We strike.”

And so, much to Jeremy’s chagrin, they waited, staying close behind Crosshairs and Sideswipe as they zoomed round the track. Seven laps, eight laps, nine laps...finally, the final lap arrived.

“All right, final lap; we need some POWER!” Jeremy shouted, urging Drift on. But he never could have imagined what happened next.

Instead of initiating rapid acceleration, Drift activated his bottom boosters, launching him and his occupant over Sideswipe and Crosshairs, landing with a tremendous bump. Drift immediately hit the accelerator, charging towards the second-to-last corner, leaving the other two biting the dust.

“*Beep*!” Jeremy swore, his face rather pale. “*Beep*!” He took several calming breaths. “You have boosters?”

“Yes,” Drift said simply. “And now, we win.”

And that he did, completing the second-to-last-corner, rounding Gambon and crossing the finish line a full second before the two Corvettes.

“Happy?” Drift asked, but Jeremy was in no condition to reply; sweat dripped down his forehead, and his hands were shaking rather badly. It took him several seconds to even attempt to open the door, and once he finally staggered out, he almost collapsed onto Richard.

“Woah, you alright, mate?” Richard asked worriedly.

“I...think so?” Jeremy replied. He let out a deep breath. “That was quite possibly the most terrifying thing in my entire life. The whole car just leapt into the air...my throat went straight into my stomach.”

“Sounds like you had a great time,” James said. “Though I must say it was fun watching everything from the back.”

As Jeremy was comforted by his two friends, Crosshairs stormed over to Drift, looking rather annoyed.

“That was my race, Bluey!” he said angrily, poking Drift in the chest. “Booster rockets are cheating!”

“Like turbo boosters aren’t,” Sideswipe snorted. “The cheater was out-cheated.”
Drift shrugged. “I was told not to let you two win,” he said simply.

“Still,” continued Sideswipe, “since I didn’t cheat, I guess that makes me the winner.”

“We should have a rematch with out Crosshairs and Drift,” Mirage suggested. “See what happens in a fair race.”

“You’re on,” Sideswipe said immediately, and the two transformed and zoomed off once more.

~8~

Back in the studio, the crowd was showing its appreciation once more.

“Did we ever find out who won that race?” Richard asked.

“Nope,” Jeremy said. “They got called away on a mission about thirty seconds afterwards. They were gone after another minute.”

“It’s an important job they do,” James said seriously. “They’re a real-life International Rescue, except with aliens instead of the Thunderbird machines.”

“So nothing like the tv show then,” Jeremy said. “I will say this, however: I didn’t go back crying to my parents afterwards, so the green Autobot was wrong.”

“You know what I find interesting, though?” Richard said. “That if Drift hadn’t used his booster rockets, that race would have been won by two muscle cars…”

“That is true,” Jeremy begrudgingly admitted. “And on that truly horrifying bombshell, it’s time to end the show. Goodnight!”

Chapter End Notes

A 100% canon-to-the-story omake. It was incredibly fun to write, and we hope it was incredibly fun to read as well!
Proposal & Discovery

Chapter Summary

Jasper Schoenfeld, a Doctor of Engineering at Carnegie Mellon, makes a proposal at an anti-kaiju conference. Meanwhile, the Autobots make a startling discovering in the Marianas Trench...

September 15, 2014

Seoul wasn’t a city that Jasper Schoenfeld had visited before, but as he rushed out of Incheon International Airport to hail a taxi, sightseeing was the last thing on his mind. No, he was here for a very important meeting - a meeting that he would be sitting in right now if he hadn’t missed his original flight out of Pittsburgh. Thankfully, he had managed to book a replacement flight the next day, but it still meant that he was running late, very late. According to the conference’s programme, the schedule for the first day was nearing its end, and if his taxi to the venue was too slow, he might miss it altogether. Given the nature of the conference, that wasn’t something he could afford to do. What if he was the only person attending the conference who had thought of his idea? Granted, with the Autobots around, that was rather unlikely, but he couldn’t take that chance. Not with humanity’s survival at stake.

‘The International Summit to Discuss Kaiju Prevention Strategies’. That was the official name of the meeting, though most people simply called it ‘The Conference’. Unless you’d been living under a rock, you’d know what the title was referring to, as the Sydney attack, and the fact that the Autobots themselves had resorted to nuclear weapons to defeat the kaiju, had finally spurred the world into action, and the summit had been quickly organised. It was being promoted as one of the largest collections of world leaders in one place, with practically every nation in the Pacific Region sending in a delegation. Representatives from large companies and organisations were said to make appearances as well, possibly to suggest ideas of their own. Jasper, however, was more excited about the fact that the Autobots would also be in attendance, and was rather excited at the prospect of seeing them, even from afar. As a Doctor of Engineering at the Carnegie Mellon University, the mechanics of how the Autobots functioned had always interested him. No wonder he’d had his idea, or his ‘Eureka Moment’, as his more egotistical side liked to imagine.

After what seemed like hours, Jasper’s taxi finally pulled up outside venue, and he was out the door in a flash, practically throwing the fare at the driver. He all but ran inside the building, his suitcase trailing behind him - he hadn’t even had the time to check into his hotel. Flashing his pass at the burly security guard, he looked wildly around for the doors to the auditorium. Finding them, he tentatively opened them and slipped inside.

The auditorium was huge, much larger than he expected, with what had to be a couple of thousand people in attendance. His attention was immediately drawn to the platform at the front of the room, where, with a twinge of excitement, he saw three of the Autobots standing tall and impassive. He recognised Optimus Prime of course, the famed leader of the Autobots, as well as one of the green ones - Ratchet - but he couldn’t recall the blue one’s name, though he knew that it turned into some sort of electric car. In front of the Autobots was a lectern, behind which a man - Stacker Pentecost, going by the programme - stood, giving a rousing speech about refusing to let the kaiju force humanity into submission.
Wishing fervently that he could have a cigar to alleviate his nerves, Jasper found his seat in the rearmost row, stowed his suitcase under it, and began to listen.

“...The Autobots can’t help us forever, and we’ve already seen what happens when they can’t get to a kaiju in time. We need to get off our lazy arses and do something to help them. This is our planet. We are not going to let monsters destroy it, and we’re not going to sit back and let the aliens protect it by themselves. We need to find a way to stop the kaiju. That’s why we’re here.” A projector screen on the back wall lit up, displaying a terrifying image of the kaiju that had almost made it to Cabo San Lucas. Pentecost thrust a hand up at it, index finger outstretched. “What will it take to grab this monster by the throat and drag him back to Hell?”

The nerves in Jasper’s stomach flared, and he had an inkling that this may very well be the only opportunity to get his idea known. Pentecost could continue talking for the rest of the scheduled time, and he’d never get another chance. On the second day, it would be the companies’ turn, and he’d be even more unlikely to have a chance to be heard. The same would apply for the third day, and by the fourth, all the ideas would have already been tabled, and no one would want to hear another. If he was going to chance it, it had to be now.

And so he took a deep breath and raised his hand.

Pentecost’s next sentence died in his throat as he spotted the hand wavering in the air.

“I think I might be able to answer that,” Jasper said loudly, standing up. It took him every ounce of his self control not to show how nervous he was. A lecture theatre full of students, no problem, but a huge auditorium with the world’s most powerful people in attendance, not to mention the Autobots? It was a miracle he hadn’t fainted.

A second later he realised that a deathly silence was dominating the auditorium, as the entire audience stared in his direction.

Finally, the blue Autobot spoke. “Show us.”

Pentecost slowly nodded in agreement. “Bring him up here.”

The next few minutes passed in a blur; all Jasper could remember afterwards was the agonisingly long walk up to the stage, his notes clutched tightly in his sweaty hands, all too aware that the eyes of the world were watching his every move. He gave the USB containing his presentation to a technician, then stepped up to the lectern. His eyes habitually scanned the audience, and he recognised some faces immediately - most of them politicians or the heads of organisations that he followed with a keen interest. Maybe he’d get a chance to speak with them later.

You’re speaking to them right now, he reminded himself, and took a deep breath.

“Right, um, hello,” he began. “I’d better introduce myself. My name’s Jasper Schoenfeld, and I’m a Doctor of Engineering at the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.”

There was no reaction; the audience simply looked at him with a sort of cautious interest.

“But, um, anyway, my idea,” he continued. “So, we know that the Autobots have been, on the whole, very effective against the kaiju, having killed three of the four that have appeared so far. They are, however, um, put at a distinct disadvantage by their relatively small size - compared to the kaiju, that is.”

He glanced nervously behind him, where the Autobots stood. Seeing them on television didn’t do them justice, didn’t portray just how tall and imposing they were.
He cleared his throat. “To counteract this disadvantage, and to possibly provide us with an advantage of our own, I propose that we build, well, bigger versions of them, large enough to match a kaiju in both size and strength.”

He nodded at the technician, and the screen behind him lit up, displaying a blueprint for his idea, his ‘Eureka Moment’ - a giant robot. The design was rough, with a rather unflattering outline, and with only a few technical details provided. Needless to say, it wasn’t his best presentation.

“This is the preliminary prototype design I put together,” he explained. “It was rather rushed, but all the essentials are here. It’s about eighty metres tall, and can be fitted with a variety of weapons - missiles and the like. But the main offensive tool will be its size and strength. I’ve calculated that, if the frame and casing are built out of a pure iron, the brute force of impact from one of its fists will be equivalent to a hundred and sixty thousand joules of energy. That may not sound like much, but when ninety-nine percent of that is focused into a small area and not dissipated through conservation of energy, it can do a lot of damage.

“The robot will be operated by a sophisticated artificial intelligence,” he continued. “I hope the Autobots will be willing to lend a helping hand in that regard. But nevertheless, I know this project, if greenlit and funded, will face significant challenges. I’m confident however, that these challenges can and will be quickly and easily overcome. And, uh, yeah, that’s it,” he finished lamely.

There was a brief, moment of silence before several claps echoed throughout the room, which were soon joined by a few more. It was hardly an overwhelming reaction, but his presentation had been short, and he had interrupted the conference’s schedule. But he’d presented his idea, and maybe he’d get a chance to better explain it later on.

Shaking Pentecost’s hand as he returned to the lectern, Jasper turned to leave, glancing up at the Autobots in the process. To his utter astonishment, they were nodding appreciatively. And then:

“Well done,” the blue Autobot said to him. “Your presentation was very good. A giant robot to fight the kaiju is actually fairly viable - a little difficult to implement, perhaps, but ultimately workable. They sound quite similar to our Great Guardian Robots, actually.”

Jasper blinked in astonishment. “Th-thanks!” he stammered, utterly shocked. An Autobot, talking to him! It was beyond his wildest dreams!

Little did he know that that was just the beginning...

~8~

One week later...

Sideswipe sat in the cockpit of a dropship, humming quietly to himself as the ship hurtled through the sky. It was a lovely clear day, with the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean glistening below. All in all, a perfect day for flying. But like all the Autobots’ flights, this one wasn’t a joyride - it was a very important mission - much more important than usual. They were going to find out where the kaiju came from.

“Teletetran detected the kaiju much earlier than usual, thanks to the upgrades we installed after the kaiju in Cabo,” Wheeljack had explained, in an Autobot meeting a few weeks after the Sydney attack. “While we didn’t get an exact fix, I can say with one hundred percent certainty that the kaiju originate in the ocean around Guam. This location makes sense, as some of the largest and deepest marine trenches on the planet are found in this area, easily allowing an organism the size of
kaiju to remain undetected until it rose to a depth that Teletraan could reliably scan.”

“But we still don’t know where they come from, do we?” Arcee asked.

Wheeljack shook his head. “No, but I have some theories, all of which are are more unlikely than the next. An expedition to the detection point of the kaiju that attacked Sydney would hopefully reveal the true reason.”

And so, a few days afterward, Sideswipe, Wheeljack, a recovered Ironhide, and Hound had commandeered a dropship and begun the flight from Washington to Guam. But now, after nine and a half hours, they were almost there.

“Everyone all set back there?” Sideswipe called out.

“Bored,” grunted Hound, “but otherwise fine.”

“Well, you might want to sit tight now - we’re coming up to the plunge. If there’s any leakage, it’s not my problem!”

With the grinding of metal, the dropship shifted, its hull rearranging itself into an entirely different form, one suited perfectly for operation underwater. A second later, it hit the surface of the ocean, throwing an enormous foamy spray into the air, before quickly submerging.

“Any problems?” Sideswipe asked, his optics carefully scrutinising the dropship’s cockpit for any sign of leakage.

“None here,” Wheeljack reported. “The hull is holding.”

“Remind me to thank Jolt when we get back, then,” the silver Autobot said. “Shouldn’t be too much longer to the bottom, feel free to talk amongst yourselves until we arrive - you’ve all been quiet since we left Base!”

“Nothin’ to talk about,” Hound grunted. “All we’ve been doing is flying.”

Sideswipe rolled his optics, but let the subject drop, and focused on getting them to the murky depths of the Marianas Trench.

The descent to took several minutes, but eventually the dropship reached a wide enough and flat enough space on the sea floor to set down.

“Just so we don’t get flooded when we open the doors,” Sideswipe muttered, pressing a button. Cybermatter immediately ‘grew’ out of the dropship, forming a transparent hemisphere several metres wide around the craft. With another press of a button, the water inside the hemisphere was pumped out, allowing the dropship’s hold door to slide open.

Sideswipe clambered out of the cockpit and jumped out of the dropship before his friends, his wheeled feet sinking a few inches into the muddy seabed. The silver Autobot surveyed the landscape - what he could see of it, anyway. The dropship’s lights revealed only a miniscule amount of the sea floor; everything else was pitch black, save for the odd bioluminescent sea creature floating by.

“Jazz would totally be singing one of his songs right now,” Sideswipe said, looking around. “What’s that one about the garden under the sea that he likes?”
“Don’t care,” Hound said as he, Ironhide and Wheeljack exited the dropship. “His singin’ is just as bad as your constant need to talk.”

Sideswipe scowled. “I am not talkative!”

“Sure. That’s why you kept trying to start a conversation.”

“Shut up, you two!” growled Ironhide, interrupting Sideswipe’s angry retort. “We’re not here to argue with each other. Just turn on your scanners and get looking for some dormant kaiju lying around the place.”

“Still don’t think we’ll find anything.” Hound grumbled. “We only know where Teletraan detected it. What if it woke up somewhere else? We’d have come all this way for nothin’.”

Wheeljack sighed. “We’ve been over this before, Hound. This is the most likely place we’ll find a dormant one.”

“About that,” Sideswipe said. “If we do find one...I don’t fancy our chances. We’re not that mobile underwater, and someone is still recovering from a serious injury.”

“Ironhide’s fine, Sideswipe, as I’m sure Ratchet told you,” Wheeljack said reassuringly. “He and Optimus wouldn’t have let him come on this mission if they weren’t convinced he was fine. And if we do find a kaiju, we don’t wake it up, but if we do, we’ll be running very fast, and you’ll be the one getting us out of here.”

Sideswipe didn’t reply, still unconvinced. He’d seen how badly damaged Ironhide - and the Wreckers - had been. They all had...

“Jolt, Wheeljack, get to Optimus. The rest of you, with me!” Ratchet shouted, running up to the pile of rubble that had, only a few short minutes ago, been the apartment building upon which Ironhide and the Wreckers had stood. Jazz, Bumblebee, Mirage and Crosshairs were already there, furiously cutting through steel, concrete and a mix of other materials in an effort to reach the crushed and buried Wreckers. Sideswipe was tending to Ironhide, trying to keep him focused as the pain from his pulverised legs undoubtedly sought to overwhelm him.

“Primus,” Ratchet breathed. He hadn’t seen an injury this bad since Jazz’s bisection at the hands of Megatron. “Sideswipe, lay him on his back; we need to give him room to stretch out, or his self repair systems won’t bind the femoral circuitry and energon links correctly.”

Sideswipe did as instructed, sweeping away some debris to make a space for the old Autobot to lie down.

“Ironhide, Ironhide, listen to me. I need you to focus,” Ratchet said, leaning over his friend. A section of his back detached from his body and transformed into a flying medical scanner, which hovered over Ironhide’s head. “I’m going to test your retinal scanners, just follow the light.”

The drone flew slightly to the left, and Ironhide’s optics flickered to the side, slowly following it as it then moved back to the right.

“Allright, you’re a bit dazed; all that rubble must have dislodged some neural circuits. You’ll be fine, just stay still and let your repair subroutines do their work.”

There was a shout behind him, and he turned to see that Jazz and the others had just succeeded in locating the Wreckers. Trusting that Sideswipe would be able to make sure Ironhide remained...
where he was, Ratchet hurried over to his new patients, immediately scanning them for spark activity.

“Thank Primus, they’re still functional,” he said, very much relieved. “Quick, get them out.”


“Hold on,” Jazz said, and loosed a quick laser bolt that completely melted the obstruction. Roadbuster immediately shot out of the hole, knocking Crosshairs off his feet.

A blue liquid was spurting sickeningly from Roadbuster’s torso, staining the surrounding debris.

“Energon leak!” Bumblebee shouted.

“I’m on it!” Ratchet hurried over and covered the gaping wound with a Patch, a thin piece of cybermatter that bonded with Roadbuster’s body, sealing the wound.

“Found Topspin!” Mirage said, heaving on the blue Autobot. “He’s pretty messed up.”

Ratchet grimaced. Mirage was right - several of the more extraneous parts of Topspin’s body had been bent, twisted, or even sheared off. Thankfully though, he wasn’t leaking energon.

“Teletraan, I want a dropship here now!” Ratchet ordered. “I need to get them back to base as soon as possible.”

‘ Affirmative,’ the computer replied. ‘Dropship will be at your position in five minutes.’

By this time, Bumblebee had succeeded in hauling Leadfoot out of the rubble as well, and it wasn’t a pretty sight. Whereas Ironhide’s lower body had been crushed, the opposite was true for the red Wrecker - his upper chest, neck and head had all been smashed beyond recognition. Even as Bumblebee gently began lowering his friend to the ground, the thin pieces of cybermatter and wire still connecting Leadfoot’s neck to his body snapped, and the Autobot’s flattened head fell to the ground with a thunk.

“Scrap,” Bumblebee swore. While decapitation wasn’t fatal for Cybertronians, it could result in some stimuli feedback errors and other minor side effects if the head wasn’t reattached correctly in time. “We’ve got a Roller!”

Ratchet was at his side in seconds, and immediately picked up Leadfoot’s head - only to groan in frustration. “I can’t reattach this, it’s too damaged! Where’s that dropship?”

“His self-repair systems will fix the damage, won’t they?” Bumblebee asked.

“Yes, but they need a constant supply of energon to work,” Ratchet replied. “But with his torso this damaged... he’ll have to spend some time in a Regeneration Chamber in order to get that.”

Bumblebee grimaced. “So you can’t do anything?”

“Not until the dropship arrives. I can perform some surgery once we’re on it, and give him some energon canisters to tide him over until we get to the Chamber.” He glanced anxiously up at the sky. “Come on…”

“How are they? Are they all functional?” A one-armed Optimus bounded over the rubble, optics wide with fear.
“It’s alright, Prime, they’re still with us,” Ratchet said reassuringly. “Just... not without injuries.”

At this, Optimus visibly slumped with relief. “Thank the Maker.”

A nudge from Hound brought Sideswipe out from his reverie. “Hey, we’re movin’ out.”

“Huh? Oh, right.”

The four Autobots moved towards the edge of the cybermatter hemisphere.

“Remember, only communicate via your comm. unless you want your vocal processors flooded,” Wheeljack warned. “And I don’t think Ratchet will want to flush them out.”

And with that comment, they passed seamlessly through the hemisphere, feeling nothing but air one moment, then the immense pressure of nearly eleven kilometres of water bearing down upon them the next.

“Right,” Sideswipe said, opening a comm. link to Wheeljack, Hound and Ironhide. “What are we looking for?”

“Any data that is incongruent with the surroundings,” Wheeljack said. “A faint pulse, perhaps, or any strange electromagnetic signals. Or concentrated radioactivity, toxic chemicals...stuff like that. Trust me, if we come across one, we’ll know about it.”

“What if we don’t?” Hound asked.

“Then we look somewhere else until we do.”

They walked on in silence for what seemed like hours, detecting nothing unusual. Their flood lights lit up the surrounding ocean for a pitifully small distance, giving them only shadowy glimpses of the surrounding rock. Their inbuilt scanners gave them a considerably more comprehensive view of everything in a one kilometre radius, but still nothing out of the ordinary appeared. Until...


The other Autobots exchanged glances.

“Let’s have a look,” Wheeljack said, and they moved off in the direction of the signals. It wasn’t long before they reached the sources.

“I thought we’d stumble across them,” Ironhide said, looking down at the sea floor. A rusted, barnacle-covered face leered up at him, teeth bared. It was Megatron. Four other bodies were dotted around the place, all in an equal state of decay. Not all of them were intact, but all were recognisable.

“The humans dumped them here after we defeated them,” Ironhide explained. “The Laurentian Abyss was misinformation designed to stop humans finding their bodies. Looks like it worked.”

“So this is where you ended up, Megatron,” Sideswipe said quietly, staring down at the Decepticon leader’s corpse. “You once commanded the largest army on Cybertron...but look at you now...a rusting home for small sea creatures, all delusions of grandeur forgotten. Pathetic.”

“I almost feel sorry for him,” Hound observed. “Almost.”
“Eons of war, and it all led to this,” murmured Wheeljack. “It hardly seems real.”

“They got what they deserved,” Ironhide growled. “All of them. Punkass Decepticons.”

“Shame Starscream didn’t join them,” Hound agreed. “I would’ve liked to have seen that scrapheap rust down here with the rest of them.”

“He’ll come back,” Ironhide said, narrowing his optics, “and when he does, he won’t be leaving.”

They stayed there for several more minutes, looking down at their enemies’ corpses, not mourning, but remembering, reflecting on how much their lives had changed in the last few years, and how, even now, the War was beginning to feel like a distant memory, so far removed from anything they had experienced on Earth.

“Come on,” Wheeljack said eventually, tearing himself away from the sight of the rusted bodies. “Leave them. They’re just piles of cybermatter now.”

And so one by one, the Autobots walked away from the cadavers of their fallen foes, not once looking back.

They continued their search for the hypothetical dormant kaiju for some time, traversing a large amount of terrain, finding nothing. No abnormal pieces of landscape, no unusual data that would suggest a sleeping behemoth. But just as they were contemplating heading back to the dropship and moving to a new area, their scanners went berserk.

“What the-?” Wheeljack cried out in alarm. “Radiation, photon streams, ambient energy...they’re off the scale!”

“I’m getting it too,” Sideswipe confirmed. “Strange…”

“Well would you look at that, we’ve found one,” Hound said, surprised. But Wheeljack disagreed.

“No, no, I don’t think so,” he said. “There’s nothing in this data that would indicate an organic lifeform at all...this is something else entirely.”

“It’s coming from up ahead,” said Sideswipe, “so let’s go check it out.” He began trudging forwards, the other Autobots following close behind.

“It’s getting lighter,” observed Ironhide after a minute or so. He was right; light levels had risen sufficiently to see a decent distance ahead without the need for artificial lighting.

“The light source is stronger over there.” Sideswipe pointed at a rocky outcrop about three hundred metres away, the silhouette of which was clearly visible against a eerie orange glow. “Hang on, I’ll just have a look.”

“Sideswipe, wait!” cried Wheeljack. “It’s not a kaiju; I don’t know what it is. It could be anything!”

But the Autobot ignored him, and quickly reached the outcrop, climbing up onto a precipice. There was a brief silence.

“Guys…” he called, his voice wavering slightly over the comm.. “Who ripped open this big dimensional portal thing?”

“What?” Wheeljack said, and hurried as fast as he could to the precipice, and looked down. A void
of glowing orange energy was swirling at the bottom of the trench.

“Primus, Unicron and the First Thirteen…” he said in awe, as the energy sparked and crackled, long tendrils probing outwards from the portal like miniature bolts of lightning. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s also where the Kaiju come from, or I’m a Space Slug,” Ironhide muttered, joining Wheeljack and Sideswipe at gazing upon the portal. Unlike them, however, he was distinctly unimpressed. “Can we close it?” he asked Wheeljack.

Wheeljack shook his head. “Not right now, no,” he said. “In fact, not ever, given our current resources. Even if we did have more, I wouldn’t bet on us closing this thing for a good long while. Neither Ratchet, Jolt or myself are particularly well-versed in spacebridge technology and the like...that was Perceptor’s area.”

“Great,” Hound mumbled. “Big hole that spews giant monsters, and we can’t fill it in. Is there anything we can do?”

Wheeljack rubbed his head. “With the limited equipment we possess, the most we can do is analyse some aspects of it, and monitor it for activity. That will allow us to detect the kaiju much earlier than Teletraan would...but apart from that, no, there’s nothing we can do.”

Sideswipe swore.

“In that case,” Ironhide said. “We better tell Prime.” He opened a comm. link to the Autobot leader. “Prime, this is Ironhide. We’ve found something close to where Teletraan detected the latest monster, and if I know you at all, you’re not going to like it.”

~8~

The Autobots’ base had been a lot quieter recently, due in no small part to the absence of Mudflap and Skids. Now, however, laughter was echoing around one of the larger hangars, where a long, rectangular conference table was positioned on a platform that was raised several metres of the floor. Around this table sat representatives of the newly formed Pan Pacific Defence Corps, a largely independent subdivision of the United Nations that had been created at the conclusion of the Seoul Conference. Optimus, Jazz and Ratchet stood next to the platform, looking on as the representatives reacted to the news of the find in the Marianas Trench.

“A portal? A dimensional portal? On the bottom of the ocean?” Lachlan Taylor, the United States representative, was finding it hard to refrain from laughing. “You can’t be serious!”

Optimus Prime stared at him impassively. “I do not joke, Mister Taylor,” he said coolly. “It is indeed true that my Autobots have found what they believe to be a dimensional portal in the area of ocean you have designated as ‘Challenger Deep’. We believe this to be where the kaiju originate.”

“Forgive me for not believing you right off the bat, Optimus,” said Dustin Kreiger, the newly-appointed head of the PPDC, “but some proof that this portal exists would be very welcome.”

Optimus nodded. “I can show you the visual logs that recorded the moment the portal was discovered.”

“Please do.”

Optimus pressed a finger to his temple, and the next moment, beams of light shot from his optics and landed on the table, displaying the logs for all to see. The committee members watched on in silence as the portal was gradually revealed, from the first faint glow, to the majesty of the orange
energy swirling and crackling at the bottom of the pit.

“I see no reason for you to doubt my words now, Secretary-General,” Optimus said pointedly, once the logs had finished playing.

Kreiger swallowed heavily. “Indeed,” he said, shifting uneasily in his seat. “Evidently, it seems that the kaiju threat is not as straightforward as it first appeared. Is there anything we can do about it? Er- turn it off, for instance?”

“That is unlikely. We do not have the resources, nor the expertise, on hand in order to make an attempt at interfering with it, at least for the foreseeable future.”

Kreiger grimaced. “In that case, does anyone have any suggestions for what we do with this damn ‘portal’?”

The Chilean representative piped up immediately. “We could perhaps monitor it for kaiju activity?” she suggested.

A low murmur of agreement swept along the table.

“Very well then,” said Kreiger. “A monitoring device will be set up near this ‘portal’ that will tell us exactly when a kaiju arrives - that is, unless you Autobots have any objection?”

“No, but may I suggest that we also use this device to study the portal as well?” Ratchet said. “The more we know about it, the closer we may get to being able to close it.”

“Even better,” Kreiger said. He looked up at Optimus. “I assume you will deal with the construction of such a device, given that it will be studying something that humanity has no experience with?”

Optimus nodded. “I will instruct Wheeljack to begin work as soon as he returns. No doubt he has taken some preliminary measurements already.”

“Excellent,” Kreiger said. “Now, we have other matters to discuss, namely how to continue our funding model for the projects we’ve invested in since the conference a week ago. Optimus, I understand that you still support Schoenfeld’s giant robot idea?”

“That is correct,” the Autobot leader said. “We feel that it is the most viable of the ideas put forward thus far.”

“I’m not convinced,” Taylor interrupted. “Schoenfeld’s proposal certainly sounds promising if we can build it, and that’s not including the inherent dangers of using an artificial intelligence to control such powerful machines.”

“Why?” Jazz asked. “Teletraan’s not one to run amok, or do anything outside of his programming.”

“That may well be the case, but I’m not sure that will convince the public. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but advanced artificial intelligences have somewhat of a...stigma surrounding them. The public may not like the fact that an AI will be controlling a machine of the size and power Schoenfeld proposes.”

“I can assure you that their worries would be unfounded,” Ratchet said. “Even the Decepticons, after two billion years, were not capable of compromising Teletraan, despite the efforts of their best and brightest. There isn’t anything that anyone on this planet can do to make Teletraan One a security risk.”
Taylor opened his mouth to argue, but Kreiger cut him off, sighing.

“That may be the case, Mister Ratchet, but in the interest of public perception, I think it best if we abandon the AI idea - not necessarily for good, but definitely for the foreseeable future.”

Jazz frowned. "Then how're you gonna pilot the things?"

At this, Kreiger and other representatives looked uncomfortable.

"Well," Kreiger said slowly. "We were actually hoping that you would be able to..."

The was a brief, awkward silence, during which the Autobots exchanged meaningful glances.

“Secretary General, as much as I appreciate your intentions," Optimus said eventually, "We will have to decline your request."

“Respectfully, Optimus, your Autobots have experience in fighting the Kaiju. You would be perfect pilots for Schoenfeld’s project, if it eventuated.”

“Apt pilots we may very well be, Your Excellency, but there are valid reasons for my decision. First and foremost, technical ones. Ratchet?”

“Nothing humans can build would be able to interface with us long enough to be of any use,” Ratchet said bluntly. ”Anything you hook up to us would burn up in seconds.”

“Can’t you just build something yourselves, then?” Kreiger asked.

“Easily,” Ratchet answered, “just not on the scale we need. Our supply of both Energon and cybermatter is currently too limited to allow the construction of one, let alone half a dozen, kaiju-sized robots.”

“Surely you can find some way to make it work?” Lawrence Cole, the United Kingdom representative, demanded.

“As much as we would like to, it is simply impossible at the moment. We just don’t have the resources, and getting those resources will take years.”

Kreiger looked up at Optimus, cold grey eyes meeting piercing blue optics. He held his gaze with the Autobot for a few seconds, but his resolve quickly weakened, and he relented, looking away.

“Fine.” he said reluctantly. “Fine. We’ll use human pilots.”

Several representatives erupted in protest, but Kreiger shouted them down. “My decision is final,” he said firmly. “Schoenfeld’s program, if it goes ahead, will use human pilots. For now.” He glared up at Optimus. “The moment your supply situation changes, I wanna know about it. And tell your engineer to let Schoenfeld know about the change of plan.”

Optimus nodded. “I will instruct Jolt to relay your message.” He paused thoughtfully and glanced at Ratchet, who nodded. “Your Excellency, if it is of any help to you at all, I can send out another message asking for Autobot reinforcements. Our ranks had many varied and talented individuals, and if they were here on Earth, they could be useful in more ways than one.”

“Do it,” Kreiger said, not looking up as he stacked a sheaf of papers into a neat pile. “Sounds good.” Satisfied with his papers, he looked up and addressed the committee. “I hereby declare this first meeting of the Pan Pacific Defense Corps over. Minutes will be sent out by the end of the
week. Date of the next meeting will be advised. Now, if you don’t excuse me, I have some phone
calls to make. Good day.”

~8~

It was a bright, sunny afternoon in Arlington, Virginia, when the blue Chevrolet Volt pulled up by
the kerb, outside a rather bland, brick apartment block.

“Here we are,” Jolt informed his passenger. “Would you like me to transform?”

“No, just wait here for the time being,” Jasper Schoenfeld said. “Don’t want to shock her too
much. Seeing me on her doorstep will be enough, I imagine.”

With that, his seatbelt unbuckled itself, and the car door swung open, allowing Jasper to exit,
grimacing. Seeing every component of a car operate independently of him was something that was
going to take some getting used to. Then, of course, was the fact that he had been sitting inside a
sentient alien robot. He’d found the experience quite surreal the first time, but the members of the
Autobot Liaison Team had assured him that he would eventually get over it. Working with the
Autobots was proving to be one hell of an adjustment period. Heck, even the fact that he was
actually working with them was hard to believe at times - if it wasn’t for the vivid recollection of
Jolt approaching him after his presentation in Seoul and offering to work with him, he’d swear he
was dreaming.

But he wasn’t, and thank god for that, for Jolt was proving to be an immense help in perfecting his
giant robot idea, streamlining the design, improving specifications, and contributing other helpful
advice. He had also suggested using the supercomputer, Teletraan One, to pilot the robots, until
that aspect of the design had been shut down by the newly formed PPDC in favour of human
pilots.

That was the reason he and Jolt were in Arlington. After much deliberation, they’d both decided
that the only way of getting a human to effectively and efficiently drive one of the giant robots was
to link the pilot’s mind directly with the machine - something that was well beyond Jasper’s
knowledge. Jolt was hesitant to attempt it as well, saying that he knew far too little about the
human mind to be of any use. And so Jasper had remembered Caitlin Lightcap, one of his brightest
students who, when he last heard, was working on a neural interface for jet fighters and their pilots
at DARPA. Unfortunately, they had last seen each other half a decade ago, and their parting hadn’t
been under the best of circumstances; if he had to be honest, he was quite nervous about seeing her
again. But with the fate of the world potentially at stake, he had no choice.

It was a short walk up to her apartment’s door, and, seeing no doorbell or buzzer, he knocked.
Seconds later, he heard footsteps, a lock snapping, and then the door was pulled open. She looked
almost exactly the same as he remembered her. Large, thick rimmed glasses covered her fiercely
intelligent eyes, and long, flowing blonde hair spilled down her back. She stared at him for several
seconds, her mouth dropping open as she let out a surprised ‘oh!’.

“Hello, Caitlin,” he said.

“Doctor Schoenfeld,” Caitlin said, rather faintly. “What a surprise! Um, come in, I suppose.”

“Thanks,” Jasper muttered, sliding past her and into the hallway. “Nice place you got.”

“Can I get you anything?”
“No thanks, I’ll be fine,” he replied, looking around the room. It was a rather messy place, with thick books and papers scattered around the place, and overflowing boxes sitting next to the similarly-stuffed bookshelf. A wooden table occupied the space in the middle of the room, and it too was covered in books and papers, as well as other stationary equipment, a coffee cup, and…

He averted his gaze immediately and took a seat on a rather well-worn couch, hoping she hadn’t followed his gaze. That was her private business, and in all likelihood, she didn’t want him to know about it. Thankfully, though, she seemed not to have noticed, and sat down on a chair opposite him.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Doctor Schoenfeld?” she asked.

“Caitlin, please,” he said, “we’re far from strangers, you and I. It’s Jasper.”

“I’m sorry...it’s just - it’s been so long.” She glanced at a photo hanging on the wall behind him. It was of them both together, taken when she had been studying at Carnegie Mellon, when he and Caitlin had been lovers. His wife had found out about the affair shortly before she graduated, and their relationship had ended. Life had quickly moved on for Jasper, but he’d be lying if he said he didn’t have any regrets about what happened five years ago.

He smiled wistfully. “It has been a long time,” he agreed. “I could call you Doctor Lightcap now. You’ve earned it, no doubt. You were my best student. DARPA doesn’t hire just anybody.”

Caitlin looked away. “I’m on leave from DARPA. There were...difficulties.”

He frowned. “What kind of difficulties?”

“You’re being polite, and I appreciate that, but...you’ve already seen what’s on the table.”

So she had caught him looking at the bottles of medication. “Caitlin, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have - ” he began.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, cutting him off. “Let’s not pretend any of this is normal. I’m not the girl you remember.”

“That doesn’t matter to me,” he said softly. “I’m here because I need your help.”

Caitlin looked up, surprised. “With what?”

Jasper took a deep breath. “A way to kill the kaiju.”

She blinked. “K-kaiju?”

He nodded. “Yes. I went to that conference in Seoul a couple of weeks ago, and the United Nations approved my idea. I’m trying to build giant robots to fight the kaiju.”

“But the Autobots -?”

“Are helping me. One’s parked outside right now.”

“Out-outside? It drove you here?”

“Yeah.”

“But why do you need me if you have them? How can I be of help if you have aliens with all their advanced technology and expertise? What can I possibly do to help? Why do you want my help?” She sounded frantic, as if not quite able to believe that she was needed.
“Because you are one of the foremost experts in brain-machine interfaces,” Jasper explained. “That’s the only realistic way we’re going to get these mechs moving.”

“Oh,” Caitlin said quietly. She bit her lip. “I’m sorry, Jasper, but I’m not sure -”

“This isn’t charity, Caitlin,” he said determinedly. “Even the Autobots admitted they would have trouble doing this by themselves. You were the first person I thought of.” He sighed. “The world needs you, Caitlin, hell, the Autobots need you... I need you... and I wouldn’t be asking if I doubted you.”

A tear slid down Caitlin’s cheek, and she blinked several times to clear her eyes. His words had resonated with her much more than he had expected.

“Thank you,” she sniffed, smiling at him.

“No need to thank me,” he said kindly, returning her smile. “I’m just trying to help the world. Without you, I won’t be able to do that at all.”

~8~

Optimus Prime stood alone in the control room in the Autobots’ Base, the dim glow of the holographic Earth reflecting off his metallic features. His optics were closed as he concentrated, sending a comm. message to the stars via Teletraan’s network of satellites.

My name is Optimus Prime, and I send this message to any Autobots in the surrounding galactic quadrants:

The war with the Decepticons is over, and the hunt for the Allspark is at an end. Myself and a few others have taken refuge on the planet Earth, where we live among the native population. But our troubles are not at an end. The planet is besieged by large organic creatures, and it is only a matter of time before the natives’ civilisation falls. I humbly request your assistance to help us defeat these creatures, and restore peace to this planet. Co-ordinates will be transmitted at the conclusion of this message. May Primus be with us all.

He opened his optics. The message had been sent. Now all he had to do was wait.
Recruitment

Chapter Summary

Jasper introduces Caitlin to the Autobots, while Ratchet and Wheeljack's investigation into the portal yields some worrying results...

“Is that him?”
“Yeah.”
“But he looks just like a normal car.”
Jasper laughed softly. “I think that’s the point.”

Fifteen minutes after Jasper had arrived at Caitlin’s apartment, he was leaving it - and Caitlin was coming with him, to Autobot Command. He was enormously happy that he’d managed to convince her, and not necessarily for professional purposes. He’d never admit it, but just the sight of her had brought back fond memories of their time together.


“As safe as an alien robot can get, I suppose,” Jasper shrugged, “but he won’t bite, I guarantee it.” Seeing that she still looked unsure, he added, “Look, just say hello. Can you do that?”

Caitlin nodded slowly and let out a tentative, “Hello?”

“Greetings, Doctor Lightcap,” the blue Chevvy Volt said. “Jasper has told me much about you, and I look forward to our partnership on this project.”

Jasper smiled knowingly at her rather stunned reaction. “Caitlin Lightcap, meet the Autobot Jolt. If everything goes to plan, you’ll be spending a lot of time with him and the others.”

The passenger door swung open.

“Go on,” Jasper nudged. “Get in.”

Rather hesitantly, Caitlin did so, letting out a small gasp when the door shut after Jasper, and the seat belt clicked itself into place.

“It’s weird, I know,” Jasper grinned, as Jolt accelerated down the road. Caitlin’s eyes grew ever wider as the pedals, steering wheel and gearstick all moved eerily by themselves. “It threw me at first,” he continued, “but you get used to it.”

“I’ve never met any human who hasn’t been disturbed by the initial experience,” Jolt agreed. “Your reaction is quite normal, let me assure you.”

“Right…” Caitlin said shakily, before letting loose a flurry of questions. “So...um...is everything made of metal, like the seats or the tyres? How do you speak as a car - through the speakers? What if someone was to detach your steering wheel? Would you still be able to transform? If you’re an
alien robot car, do we even need seatbelts?”

Jolt chuckled. “Very inquisitive, I see,” he said. “I can see why she will be a valuable member of our small team, Doctor Schoenfeld.”

Jasper just smiled. This was the Caitlin Lightcap that he remembered from college: spitting out several questions at once, her mind fiercely inquisitive. His heart twinged - all the long-buried memories of their time together came roaring back to life, and he gazed at her fondly. He’d been devastated when they were forced to split...maybe, just maybe, this project could…

He shook his head, clearing his thoughts. There were more important things at stake that personal fantasies. His attraction to Caitlin must not impede the progress of the project; that had to come first. The world had to come first.

With that resolution made, he tuned in to the explanations Jolt was now giving for Caitlin’s questions.

“...something the size of a steering wheel, there would be no discernible difference in our appearance, but if something the size of, say, the engine, were to be removed, you would notice,” Jolt was saying. “We’d still be able to transform, but our appearance would have to be altered in some way.

“As for the seat belts, well, with our reflexes it’s practically impossible for us to have an accident, or at least one where you’d be injured. It would take much more than a truck, or even a train, to put a dent in us. So no, you don’t have to wear a seatbelt, but in the interests of abiding by the law, and the fact that I’m an Autobot, I must insist that you do.”

The rest of the drive to Autobot Command was made in silence - not that it was a long drive anyway. Caitlin mainly stared out the window, contemplating the future. Only twenty-five minutes ago, she had been in her apartment, not doing anything with her life, just lazing around. And now she was going to meet the Autobots. The Autobots! The situation seemed so absurd it was hard to believe it was real. But it was, and god, was she glad of that.

“Here we are,” Jolt announced suddenly as he passed a ‘restricted area’ sign. “HALT Headquarters, coming up.”

“Huh?” Caitlin said, snapping her head round to look at Jasper, confused. Hadn’t they been going to Autobot Command?

“Autobot Command is underground,” Jasper explained quickly. “The big white building from the TV is just where the Liaison Team operates.”

“Oh, right.” She peered back out the window, looking up at the pristine building, with the giant, red Autobot logo emblazoned on the side. It reminded her of the White House in a way - not just because of the similarities in colour, but because, just like the President’s residence, it was rather revered. The Autobots were, to many (and especially the news media), stuff of legend, with their Liaison Team being commonly regarded as heroes as well. So arriving at the building where they operated was somewhat trepidatious.

But before she could express that sentiment verbally, Jolt had pulled up in front of the main entrance and opened his doors. “This is where I leave you for now,” he said. “Major Lennox wants to meet with you first, Doctor Lightcap. He’ll show you to Autobot Command shortly afterwards.”

Caitlin and Jasper exited the Autobot, and watched him drive over to a small building on the other
“Service elevator,” came a voice from behind them, “takes him down to the other Autobots.”

Caitlin and Jasper turned; a smartly uniformed man had left the big white building and was walking over to them.

“Major William Lennox,” he greeted, offering his hand, “Commanding Officer of HALT - that’s the Human-Autobot Liaison Team,” he explained. “We decided to start using the acronym officially the other day. PR department’s idea - though it’d be easier for the public to say.”

“Um, doesn’t everyone just call you the ‘Liaison Team?’” Caitlin asked, frowning.

Lennox nodded. “They do, as I attempted to point out. Didn’t help; got outvoted, unfortunately.” He sighed again. “So now I have to roll with it. Quite the headache. Anyway, please, come inside.”

She and Jasper followed him inside the doors, Jasper giving her an encouraging smile as they crossed the threshold. The foyer of the building was quite large, with reception desks positioned at the far end, below labelled portraits of all eighteen Autobots. Another two, she noticed, were hung separately on the wall to the right. Her stomach lurched, and she recognised them as the ones who had been killed by the kaiju in Cabo. She’d forgotten about them, she realised with a twinge of guilt. What they’d done deserved to be remembered.

The rest of the foyer was taken up by comfortable looking furniture, with a few water coolers and pot plants dotted in between. There were doors to other areas of the building, as well as a couple of elevators along the left wall, with strange looking paintings hung between them.

“Welcome to HALT HQ,” Lennox said, “Just a couple of things you should know, Doctor Lightcap. For starters, if you agree to help Doctor Schoenfeld with his project, you’ll be employed by the PPDC - that’s the Pan-Pacific Defence Corps. We use a lot of acronyms here,” he said, with an apologetic smile.

“I’m used to it,” Caitlin said quietly. “I worked with DARPA.”

“Which brings me to my point,” Lennox continued. “If you sign up with the PPDC, you’ll have to consider your employment with DARPA terminated. That won’t be too much of an issue?”

Caitlin frowned. “Potentially. My research…I’ll need it to help Doctor Schoenfeld. If I’m not DARPA anymore, they might not let me access it.”

“Shouldn’t be too much of a problem,” Lennox said dismissively. “Try getting it yourself via the normal method, and if that fails, just come to me and I’ll help.”

“Er - right.” She wasn’t particularly convinced that would work either. She knew DARPA was very protective of its projects and didn’t just give out research data, even to former employees. There was a long and vigorous process to get anything approved, with a lot of red tape involved - even for an organisation like the Liais- HALT- whatever they called themselves now. Still, she’d jump that hurdle when she came to it; no use worrying about it just now. There was a lot more to think about right at this moment.

Lennox led them over to one of the reception desks, past a couple of similarly uniformed HALT members, who were murmuring quietly to each other, but not soft enough that Caitlin wasn’t able to pick up a few sentences:

“...hear about Manilla?”
“They goin’ bust, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, I can’t believe it! That’s where all the aid went...the other places barely got any, but they’re almost back to normal!”

“They didn’t get nuked, though...”

Once again, Caitlin’s stomach twinged. No one liked to think about the fact that a third nuclear bomb had been detonated over a populated area, of what happened when the Autobots couldn’t reach a kaiju in time. They’d been incredibly lucky that nukes hadn’t been used more often.

Lennox reached one of the desks and smiled down at the receptionist. “Hi, Marlene, just the forms for Doctor Lightcap, please.” He turned to Caitlin. “It’s just all bureaucratic crap, I’m afraid,” he said, handing her a pen. “Stuff to do with the fact that we’re on a military airbase; I’m sure you know the drill.”

Caitlin nodded and got busy signing. “There wasn’t anything about the Autobots?” she asked when she was finished.

“No, they insist,” Lennox replied. “No NDAs of any kind - pretty much everything we do here is public knowledge anyway.”

Marlene took the signed papers and replaced them with a second, much fatter, wad.

“The PPDC’s employment forms,” Lennox said. “You don’t have to sign them straight away, just when you’re absolutely sure you want to help Doctor Schoenfeld with his project.”

“Oh, well, um, I probably will...”

“Excellent,” Lennox nodded. “Now, I’m sure you’d like to see the Autobots?”

“Yes!” Caitlin blurted out, before she could stop herself.

Lennox chuckled. “Thought so. Follow me.” He led them over to one of the elevators. “We wanted teleporters, but they haven’t invented them yet,” he joked, pressing the button. “That’s one thing we might beat them to. Maybe.”

Jasper laughed; Caitlin cracked the faintest of smiles, still rather overwhelmed by what was happening.

With a ding, the elevator door opened, and they all piled into it. Lennox pressed a button labelled ‘A’, and the elevator lurched into action, slowly descending to the Autobots’ base.

“Who’s in today?” Jasper asked Lennox interestedly.

“Optimus, Ratchet, Mirage, Wheeljack,” Lennox replied, listing them off on his fingers. “Jolt, obviously. I think the Wreckers are around too, and Ironhide as well.”

“Hard to keep track of them?”

Lennox rolled his eyes. “Don’t you know it. They don’t tell us who’s going where unless you ask. Not that contacting them’s a problem, but it’d be nice to have some sort of roster.”

The elevator rocked slightly as it stopped its descent; a second ding, and the doors opened, revealing a long, wide, brightly lit corridor, with a nondescript door at the end.
“Nearly there,” Lennox remarked, walking forward at such a brisk pace that Caitlin struggled to keep up. He reached the door and pulled it open, stepping back to let them walk out onto a metal balcony that overlooked a large room. The walls were lined with shelves full of advanced equipment, the function of which she could only guess. She let out a gasp; in the middle stood Optimus Prime himself, flanked by several of the other Autobots. There was a blue one that seemed oddly familiar, and with a start she realised it was Jolt, in his humanoid form.

“Hello, Doctor Lightcap,” Optimus said. “My name is Optimus Prime. On behalf of my Autobots, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

~8~

Jasper sent Caitlin’s employment forms off to the PPDC before the ink was dry, and within a fortnight, they’d been assigned to a facility in Pittsburgh. This pleasantly surprised him, as it allowed to see his son while still working on the project. He’d resigned from his position at Carnegie Mellon, though - juggling a university job while undertaking a project of this scale wasn’t something he was capable of. But regardless, the allocation to Pittsburgh came with their preliminary funding; a small budget for him, Caitlin and Jolt to demonstrate the potential their giant robot - mech - idea had. The same applied to the handful of other projects the PPDC was also considering. Only one project would be approved and receive full-scale funding, and they had to make sure it was them. Not purely for egotistical reasons, but because, as Jolt had told him just before Caitlin was recruited: “Yours is one of the few ideas that makes any sort of offensive and defensive sense.” They had to come out on top for the good of humanity, and with Caitlin and Jolt helping him, Jasper was confident that they would do so.

The facility itself wasn’t particularly big; just a medium sized hangar and a couple of smaller rooms, one of which would become Caitlin’s laboratory. It wasn’t much, but it would do. More importantly, though, Jolt could fit inside.

“So,” Jasper said once their brief tour of the facility had concluded, “where to begin?”

“I thought we answered that,” Jolt said. “The drive mechanism. That’s why we recruited Doctor Lightcap.”

“Yes, yes, yes, I know, but where do we start now?”

“Well, um, now that I’ve got my research from DARPA, I can start work on the interface that allows the pilot to drive the machine,” Caitlin said, rather tiredly. It had taken a while to get DARPA to acquiesce to her request, and even then she’d had to make a visit to their headquarters with Jolt and a lieutenant from HALT. “I was thinking that, um, maybe you two could start building something to test the drive interface on. Once I’ve actually built one, of course.”

“That’s probably the best idea,” Jolt agreed. “Something simple to start with. We don’t want to build the whole thing only to find out you humans can’t drive it.”

“Definitely not,” said Jasper. “So, shall we build, say, an arm as a proof-of-concept thing?”

Caitlin shrugged. “Sounds good to me. Just as long as you get one built.”

“We will,” Jolt said confidently. “Won’t be too much of a problem.”

Jasper raised an incredulous eyebrow. “You think it’ll be easy?” He snorted. “If only. We’re not really that good with robotics, in case you hadn’t realised.”

“On the contrary,” Jolt said, “it won’t be anywhere near as hard as you imagine.”
“Why?”

“Because you have me,” Jolt stated. “And lucky for you, I’m a very good and very experienced engineer.”

“You’re going to help us design it?”

Jolt gave him a puzzled look. “What did you think I was here for?” he said.

Jasper flushed and mumbled something under his breath.

“To be honest, however, it will be a new experience for me,” Jolt continued. “I’m used to working with much more advanced technologies - but I suppose I’ll be able to come up with something with the resources we have available.”

“What you design would have to work for our purposes,” Caitlin pointed out.

“Which is why I’m working alongside you two. You, Caitlin, have the knowledge we need to make the machines work for humans. I’m not Ratchet; technology like mind-machine interfaces are not something I could comfortably build and say with absolute certainty. Well, not designs meant for humans, at any rate.”

“Then, um, why doesn’t Ratchet help us as well?”

“He will, if you ask him. But have a good attempt at it yourself first. He doesn’t like it when people don’t try before asking for his assistance.”

“Ah,” Caitlin nodded, understanding. She’d worked with people like that before, and they generally got the best results from those working under them.

“Well then,” Jasper said. “If that’s all decided, shall we make a start?”

The others voiced their agreement. It was time for the mech project to begin in earnest.

~8~

Ratchet was worried, incredibly worried. In fact, he didn’t think he’d been this worried since the days leading up to the Ark’s departure from Cybertron. But there was no denying the results Teletraan had just produced.

“See, look here!” Wheeljack was gesturing aggressively at some of the readings displayed on Teletraan’s screen. “This radiation is incredibly strange. Alien, in fact.”

“We can’t identify it?” Ratchet asked.

“It bears... some similarities to a few different types of radiation, but there’s no exact match,” Wheeljack stated. “And you know what that means, don’t you?”

Ratchet did. An undiscovered radiation type... to say that was a big deal was a huge understatement. Why, as some like Crosshairs would ask? Well, as Ratchet realised, the Cybertronian race was one of the oldest in existence, and one of the most advanced. And yet, they didn’t have this specific type of radiation documented.

It was possible that they had encountered it, and simply lost the knowledge like so many other things during the Great War, but Ratchet considered that unlikely.
“What is it similar to?” he asked Wheeljack.

Wheeljack smirked and gestured, Teletraan obediently bringing up several new windows. “That’s the thing. The closest matches are Transwarp radiation types.”

Ratchet froze. “You mean...?”

“Interdimensional,” Wheeljack nodded. “The portal doesn’t connect two points of space in the same universe, but two points of space in two separate universal streams.” He seemed rather excited, given the implications of such a thing. Then again, given Wheeljack, it was the implications that were probably the reason he was so excited.

“That’s... not good.” It was extremely rare that they - that anybody - had to deal with other universal streams. The last time Cybertronian civilization had encountered something related to that particular subject had been Hytherion, and...

Ratchet cut the thought off then and there. “Whatever is on the other side could be anything. Anyone.”

“Yeah,” Wheeljack agreed. “And given the Kaiju, they’re hostile too.”

Not good was understatement. This was bad, and had the potential to go from bad to catastrophic.

“We can’t close it, can we?”

“Unlikely.” Wheeljack answered. “You know none of us are all that good when it comes to dimensional sciences. Even studying it is a fair stretch.”

Oh, what Ratchet wouldn’t give to have Perceptor here right now. But that was enough doom and gloom. They had a job to do, and that job was analyzing the Portal. “Let’s... just start running tests. We need to figure out how it interacts with energy and matter - why it lets the Kaiju out, but doesn’t allow the ocean in, where it draws its energy from, how stable it is, everything we can figure out with what we have on hand.”

Wheeljack nodded, and then picked up a few tools. “Way ahead of you. Any drop ships free?”

Ratchet finished typing something into Teletraan. “Not anymore.” He shared a knowing look with Wheeljack. “Let us see if there are any volunteers to help us.”

~8~

Deep space was something that he’d seen too much of, in his opinion. Interstellar dust, cosmic radiation, micrometeorites... After enough time, all of it simply became unremarkable beyond the effect it had upon him during his interstellar cruise.

Planets were markedly more interesting. Not always, but occasionally. A dead, barren world was no more worthy of his attention except as a place to hide, plant whatever quantities of Energon he’d require for the next trip, and then go into stasis conserving power. Living planets, however, places where life existed, beings gathered, were different - interesting enough to stave off the mindless boredom that came with nobody to interact with and nothing to see for years and years at a time.

How unfortunate that he was no longer on a planet, but again drifting through space. He had not left because he needed to, but because he had received a message.
Optimus Prime had called into the void, speaking of a new world, a new refuge. He had said the war was over, he had said the hunt for the Allspark was at an end.

After so long, it was almost hard to believe.

But, it was Optimus Prime. The name alone was reason enough for him to listen.

And so, he had taken with him a supply of Energon for a long trip, made his way to some of the few remaining Space Bridges that were still intact, and got going.

It was unfortunate that he couldn’t simply use the Space Bridge to jump straight to his destination, but he’d admit that a few years of travel was better than centuries.

In terms of cosmic distances, he had been relatively close to his destination when he had received the second message. Optimus spoke of large, organic and dangerous creatures. Optimus requested assistance.

He intended to give all that he could.

The time of his arrival would come soon. Sooner still for him than for everybody else; at the velocity he was travelling, time moved at less than a third of its normal speed. Out of habit, he checked and rechecked his course, and found no anomalies.

He let his thoughts drift back into a semi-recharge state, beginning to enter low-power mode. He trusted his calculations and his course, a trust born from countless successful flights. He knew, with absolute certainty, that he would arrive in a few deca-cycles, travelling at a velocity of 96.04% the speed of light, on a course that would take him away from any planets, just in case he had somehow miscalculated. He would slow down only in the final stages of his journey, and correct his course to arrive at the planet itself.

The planet which was apparently known as ‘Earth’.

It was a pretty terrible name, in his opinion. What kind of self-respecting sapient being named their planet after dirt? Did they have other stupid names, like planet ‘mud’ or planet ‘ground’?

Those were the last thoughts that went through his mind before he fully entered low-power mode, saving energy for the last leg of his journey.
Testing

Chapter Summary

Stacker Pentecost uses Caitlin's PONS system to test the prototype armature that Jasper and Jolt have built.

November 8, 2014

It had been just over a week since Ratchet and Wheeljack had recruited several unwilling volunteers to help them analyse the portal, and they were both now presenting the results to the cold, impassive faces of the national representatives of the PPDC. Going by the nature of the results, however, those faces wouldn’t be remaining impassive for long.

“At the behest of this committee, we constructed a device for monitoring and analysing the portal in Challenger Deep,” Ratchet was saying. “Myself and a few others spend a week subjecting it to rigorous experiments designed to give us as much information about it as possible. Unfortunately, I have to report that we have learned next nothing of any immediate usefulness.”

The room exploded in a burst of angry murmuring, as representatives divulged themselves of their calm, disconnected demeanours and turned to their neighbours in shock and frustration, animatedly expressing their displeasure. Only one was bold enough to express this directly to Ratchet: the Secretary-General.

“Nothing of any usefulness?” Dustin Kreiger was seething, though even a cursory glance at his face would reveal this was more out of shock than actual anger. “Nothing? But – but you’re the Autobots!”

Having expected this reaction, Ratchet remained calm. “Next to nothing,” he repeated, his voice immediately quelling the furore in the room, which was once again one of the hangars in the Autobots’ headquarters. “We’ve learned quite a lot about the portal, but most of that information is not immediately relevant, nor immediately useful. It is certainly not pertinent to solving our Kaiju problem.”

“And why not?”

“What we can confirm about the portal is that first; we cannot interact with it in any meaningful fashion, and second; it is of extra-dimensional origin. That alone complicates matters significantly, as none us on Earth are sufficiently well-versed in Transwarp and multidimensional theory and technology to provide something of use.”

Kreiger buried his head in his hands. “Well, shit,” he said. “Is there a goddamn thing we can do?”

Ratchet shook his head. “I’m afraid not. All we can do is continue to monitor the portal for activity. We’re hoping that we can gather some more useful data when the next kaiju comes through.”

“So you’re telling us that we have to sit around on our asses until another of those things comes along?” Lachlan Taylor’s angry voice echoed along the table. “If so, perhaps you’d also care to explain how we’re going to let the world know that the Pan-Pacific Defense Corps is powerless to
stop the kaiju?"

There was an uncomfortable silence; even Ratchet didn’t know how to answer that question. Because Taylor was right – there was no way to let the world know that they couldn’t do anything about the portal. If they did, mass panic would ensue, to say the least. But if they didn’t tell, then they would be betraying the public’s trust by withholding something of vital public interest.

“Perhaps it might be pertinent to say that we are currently unable to do anything to stop the kaiju,” Ratchet suggested. “I will admit that my area of expertise is not transdimensional mechanics, but just because we currently lack the ability to remove the portal, doesn’t mean that we always will. We might be able to do something about it in the future that we currently lack the resources to do today.”

“But until then there’s the kaiju problem,” Wheeljack noted. “This isn’t the first we’ve dealt with interdimensional incursions, but it is the most problematic. The portal is the source of the problem, but the Kaiju are one of the symptoms. Until we can close the portal, they’re going to keep coming, but thankfully, they’re far more easily dealt with.”

“You’re talking about Schoenfeld’s project, right?” Lachlan Taylor asked. “It still seems a bit ridiculous. Why do we need even bigger robots to kill them?”

“The problem isn’t just ‘killing them’, Your Excellency, it’s killing them in a way that doesn’t spill their blood, creating a biohazard situation in addition to the considerable environmental damage. Doctor Schoenfeld’s project is designed for exactly that: a mobile platform capable of delivering enough blunt-force trauma through a Kaiju’s hide to kill them without breaking their skin, and therefore spilling their blood. Smaller weapons aren’t powerful enough to kill the creature without also causing immense blood loss, while nuclear weapons leave fallout.”

“I like the idea,” Kreiger admitted, and a few other representatives nodded their heads in agreement. “But his cost estimates are ridiculous! It’ll blow our budget out of the water for the next three years - and that’s assuming his estimates will turn out to be correct.”

“Initially, yes,” Wheeljack responded. “In practice, however? A kill done via that method saves potential billions in property damage, let alone lives, both of which are inevitable costs when using normal weapons. Jolt’s contribution to the project has already cut costs significantly, and the Wreckers, Ratchet and myself intend to help ourselves if a full-scale prototype is approved.”

“The other members of the board aren’t convinced,” Kreiger stroked his greying, stubbled chin. “But, maybe…” He paused briefly. “The arm Schoenfeld built- it’s ready for testing, yes?”

“All it needs is a volunteer for the interface system,” Ratchet stated. “I ran some preliminary checks myself today, and it is fully functional.”

“If the arm works properly, then we have a reason to commit to the project and commence construction of the prototype. If it functions well, then we can allocate further funding for the production of more machines. All we need is somebody to determine whether or not the project is viable,” Kreiger explained. “I have a man in mind; his name is Stacker Pentecost. He’s a pilot in the Royal Air Force, and he has an education in Avionics, Defense, and Warfare.”

“He’s also a known proponent of Schoenfeld’s project,” the Peruvian representative noted.

“You want him to be the one who tests the arm?” Ratchet asked.

“He volunteered to assist in any way he could not all that long ago. I propose that we send Stacker
Pentecost to investigate the progress of Schoenfeld and his team, and for him to report back to us to determine whether or not we should officially adopt Schoenfeld’s project.”

“Seconded,” the Australian representative said.

“All those in favour?”

The remaining representatives raised their hands.

“Motion approved. I’ll have him sent to you as soon as possible.” Kreiger looked towards Ratchet. “Out of curiosity, does Schoenfeld’s project have an actual name?”

“He calls it the ‘Jaeger Program’.”

~8~

And so, on Monday November 10, Jasper Schoenfeld was waiting outside the old abandoned warehouse that he, Caitlin and Jolt had been working in for the past five weeks. He was leaning back against the corrugated steel wall, casually chewing a sizeable cigar, eyes glued to his watch. The second hand turned past the minute mark, and the minute hand lurched forward to signify that it was now quarter past ten in the morning.

Right on cue, the low humming sound of an electric car pricked Jasper’s ears, and he looked up to see Jolt round the corner, drive the three dozen or so metres from the kerb, and pull up in front of him. The passenger door opened of its own accord, and out stepped Stacker Pentecost.

He was a lot more intimidating than Jasper remembered; he supposed that the excitement of the conference and all the events since had blurred his memory of the man somewhat. He stood an easy 6 foot 2, a giant compared to Jasper’s small, weedy frame. The combination of a crisp PPDC uniform, military buzzcut, and a face that looked as though it hadn’t smiled in years added up to a man who exuded authority, despite only being a relative underling in the new bureaucracy of the PPDC. A well-groomed moustache was camouflaged against his dark skin, and it bristled when he talked.

“Doctor Schoenfeld? Yes, I remember you from Seoul. You’re the one who had the balls to stand up in the middle of my presentation.”

Jasper flushed. He remembered the occasion very well. “Uh, thanks,” he said as they shook hands. Stacker’s grip was very firm – almost crushing – but warm. “Pleasure to meet you again, sir.” He noted that Jolt had closed his door and driven inside the warehouse. “Please, come in.”

He led Stacker inside the warehouse, to the room that served as both their break room and their reception – not that they got many guests. In fact, Stacker was the first.

“Good drive over?” he asked.

“Good enough,” Stacker said shortly. “I’m not here to make conversation, Doctor, I’m here to see what you, Doctor Lightcap and the Autobot have got for us.”

Grumbling internally, Jasper crossed to the far side of the room and opened a door that led out to a viewing platform that overlooked the hangar in which Jolt now stood, carefully inspecting the mechanical forearm that had been arduously put together over the past few weeks.

It was an impressive piece of engineering, and one Jasper was very proud of. It was based on Cybertronian anatomy, or as close as human technology could get to replicating a Cybertronian
arm. Jolt had helped him with that part, but the actual blueprints and design – that had all been him. Materials had been ordered and delivered, and he and Jolt had both laboured hard to put the thing together in under a month. He was lucky, he supposed, that Jolt didn’t need to sleep; it gave them an extra eight hours of progress per day – and often more. They’d finished it a week ago, and had been planning to start construction of an elbow and upper arm. Unfortunately, the PPDC didn’t like his cost estimates for the extension of the project, and so their money ran out.

“There it is,” Jasper said, taking an enormous bite into his cigar. “Fifty feet long. Weighs several dozen tons.”

“An arm?” Stacker asked, his frown causing deep furrows to form on his exposed forehead.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

“You’ve seen my cost estimates. If they’re approved, you get more.”

Stacker’s reply was simply a grunt, and he continued to survey the forearm for another minute before finally saying, “So you’ve worked out a control interface?”

“Yes,” called a voice from behind them, before Jasper had the opportunity to answer. “It’s called the PONS.”

Jasper turned to see Caitlin walking up to the viewing platform, iPad clutched tightly in her left hand, her elegant blonde hair done up in a topknot, her glasses drawing his gaze to her lovely blue eyes…All of a sudden, he found himself taking a trip down memory lane:

It was 2009. It had been two years since the first Autobots had arrived, and some more had recently landed. It was also four years until the idea of giant monsters emerging from the ocean to terrorise humanity leapt from the pages of fiction and into the all too real events of history. It was a more innocent, more peaceful time – at least, that’s how he remembered it.

He had been at Carnegie Mellon for half a decade at this point, and was well accustomed to the rigors of holding a professional position at a university. He’d learnt to juggle the academic side of his career with that of the educational component, as well as headhunting his undergrads for those rare, exceptional ones who could look forward to long, successful careers in their chosen fields.

One such student had been a Caitlin Lightcap. Final year of Electrical and Computer Engineering, and the only woman left in the class. That alone made her stand out from the rest of her cohort, but that wasn’t what Jasper noticed at first. No, her academic performance was what caught his attention: straight A’s – and even then, never dropping below a 95% total.

She was freakishly smart, and she knew it. She hadn’t even batted an eye when he’d approached her to the raise the possibility of her doing postgrad study under his tutelage.

That had been the beginning of their friendship, and they hit it off immediately. They hung out after lectures, enjoying sake. She would come to his office in between classes, just to chat. They spent so much time together that most her classmates and some of his colleagues began to suspect that they’d crossed the ‘professional boundary’. It didn’t take them much longer to do so. A simple playful elbow in his ribs had done it, and before he could fully comprehend what was going on, they were lovers.

They enjoyed each other for several months, not caring about the rumours, until his wife, Nancy had found out. He had been very tempted to leave Nancy for Caitlin, but the baby Nancy was carrying convinced him not to go.
And thus any idea of working with Caitlin after she graduated had dissolved. Now, though...?

Jasper shook himself out of his reverie. No matter what history there had been between him and Caitlin, he could not let himself get distracted. Not with the world at stake.

“It’s Latin for ‘bridge’,” Caitlin was saying, wincing slightly from Stacker’s handshake. “I thought the word was appropriate.” She pushed her glasses further up the bridge of her nose. “The PONS is a network that allows a neural connection between a biological brain and a compatible technological construction,” she explained. “In this case, a robotic armature.”

“So you can move this thing with just your thoughts?” Stacker asked. He was looking more interested now.

At this, Caitlin’s eyes flickered to the floor. “In theory. We haven’t tested the uplink yet. We’re still in need of a volunteer- one that isn’t either myself or Jasper. Both of us have tested smaller PONS connections, so we know what to expect, but whoever tests this will have to do it blind, just to make sure we don’t accidentally corrupt the data –”

“I get it, Doctor Lightcap.” Stacker held up his hand, interrupting her. “Are there any problems that you can identify?”

“Well, no.”

“Then it’s time to see if this ‘PONS’ works on the big stuff,” Stacker said, shrugging off his coat. “Hook me in.”

Jasper’s cigar dropped straight out of his mouth. “You serious?” he gawked.

“Of course.”

Jasper and Caitlin exchanged nervous glances. “I – I don’t recommend that, sir,” Caitlin said.

“Why? Will it kill me?”

“There are safeties, so probably not,” Caitlin admitted, “but we can’t guarantee your safety. It’s unlikely that things will go wrong, but –”

“Listen,” Stacker said, cutting her off once more. “I’m rooting for you guys. So are some of the guys up top. But the rest have prioritised you towards the bottom of the list of potential anti-kaiju projects. You’ll be lucky to get a test pilot this year. But if you get me hooked up to this rig now and it works, then you can bet that I’ll be taking this upstairs and won’t be leaving until they’re giving you everything you want.”

Caitlin looked like she didn’t know what to say. That was okay; Jasper wasn’t entirely certain himself. But they both knew that Stacker was right, and so they acquiesced.

Half an hour later, the burly PPDC officer was almost ready to begin the first real test of the PONS. He had divulged himself of his button-up shirt as well, to allow electrodes to be attached to his chest and right shoulder. His right arm was entirely covered by a thick, bulky gauntlet, on which bare copper wires stretched from his fingers to the end of the gauntlet just below his shoulder. Colour coded cables snaked from the gauntlet to a control desk ten feet in front of him, behind which Caitlin and Jasper stood. Jolt was to his rear, making some finishing preparations to the giant forearm that Stacker was now going to attempt to control with his mind.
“One more thing,” Caitlin said, and hurried over to him and placed a silver half-ring, also covered in wires and electrodes, over his head. “This is just so we can get some real-time data on your neural profile,” she explained, before jogging back over to Jasper.

“All good, Jolt?” Jasper called.

“All good,” Jolt confirmed. “If there are any problems, they’re not going to come from the arm.”

“Excellent,” Jasper muttered, and began the initialisation process.

“PONS Test Alpha, November ten, twenty-fourteen,” Caitlin said out loud for the benefit of Jolt’s audio/visual recording of the experiment. “Subject will attempt to utilise PONS connection to clench fist of robotic armature.”

“Going live in five, four, three, two, one.”

“Connection live.”

Stacker had been standing patiently, right arm raised to the horizontal, when a wave of… something…washed over him, causing him to take a step back to stop himself from falling over. He blinked, and the sensation had passed.

“You alright, sir?” Caitlin asked worriedly, eyes peeking over the thick rim of her glasses.

“Yeah,” Stacker answered. “Just felt weird for a second.”

“That would be the PONS syncing with your nervous system and brain,” Jolt noted. “What does your arm feel like?”

Stacker glanced at his arm. “Feels like it’s stuck in wet concrete.”

Caitlin was unperturbed. “That should just be resistance from the datastream; the interface isn’t calibrated to your neural profile. Give it a little bit and it will adapt. For now, just try to clench your fist.”

Stacker stared fiercely at the high-tech glove covering his fingers. It was a simple task: move his fingers. It was so simple that an infant could do it! Yet what he was about to might be the most important finger movement in the whole of human history.

So he willed his fingers into motion.

Nothing happened.

“Saw a brainwave spike there!” Jasper said excitedly.

He tried again.

Still nothing.

“Hmm. Alright, hold on for a moment –”

“No. I can do this.” Stacker grunted, perspiration starting to pool on his furrowed forehead. “Move!”

With his eyes screwed shut, he strained with all his might, mentally shouting for his fingers to be subject to his will, to lurch into motion. He was dimly aware that his internal shouting had become
audible, but he didn’t stop. This had to work.

And then, all of a sudden, he felt the wet concrete around his arm give way slightly, and his fingers slowly began to move, curling themselves into a fist. Above him, the large metal fingers suspended from the ceiling echoed his movements after a short but noticeable delay.

It had worked.

The faint beginnings of a smile manifesting on his lips, he attempted to straighten his hand, and was surprised when the movement did not require anything near the effort of will he had exerted to get his fingers to move initially.

Stacker couldn’t help himself: he burst out laughing, the usual grim expression morphing into one of pure delight. Maybe, just maybe, this crazy idea would work.

He looked up to see Caitlin and Jasper laughing as well, hugging in celebration. Behind him, Jolt was also looking rather pleased, which was as good a reaction as any. Did the Autobots laugh? He couldn’t recall seeing them do so, either in person or on television, but then, he didn’t watch them very often. Could they laugh?

Like Jasper’s recollection of the Seoul conference, Stacker would remember the next few minutes as one big blur; one moment he was being disengaged from the PONS rig by Jasper, and the next he was sitting in Jolt, on the way to the PPDC headquarters, ready to sing the praises of the team in a shoddy warehouse in Pittsburgh.

And sing their praises he did. With a minimal amount of raised voices, he, Kreiger and a few others had managed to convince the rest of the representatives to fully back Schoenfeld’s project, effective immediately. Quite a few investors would be unhappy but at the end of the day, the problem wasn’t money. It was effectiveness. And so Schoenfeld, Lightcap and Jolt had been told the good news, and a week and a half later they had been relocated to PPDC Headquarters on Kodiak Island, Alaska. It was a sizeable plot of land, and came with state-of-the-art facilities for constructing the prototype mech, and had a full-sized laboratory for Caitlin to continue work on the PONS.

Needless to say, she was very happy with the move.

“This place has more than everything we need!” Caitlin exclaimed, having run through the facility like a child waking up on Christmas morning. She grinned excitedly at Jasper, something she had been doing a lot since the successful PONS test.

Jolt was looking quite cheerful too. “If my estimates are correct,” he said, “it’s likely that we could have our full-scale prototype up and running by the end of January. It won’t be easy, but with the extra manpower and funding, there’s no reason why we shouldn’t be able to.”

Jasper let out a puff of smoke from his cigar. “Calls for a celebration, doesn’t it?”

Caitlin elbowed him playfully, and butterflies flared Jasper’s stomach. She hadn’t done that in a long, long time …

“We’ve had quite a few ‘celebrations’ since the PONS test,” she said.

“Well deserved, I should think.”

Caitlin stared up at him, eyes wide behind her glasses. “Sake?”
Jasper laughed softly. “Just like the old days,” he murmured. “Remember?”

“All the time…”

He was staring back at her now, lost in those beautiful blue eyes. Memories of sake at university after a lecture resurfaced, of her and him, laughing together, not caring for anything else in the world…

Jolt’s optics widened at the realisation of what was happening. “I’ll go and check the personnel manifold, shall I? And ask Ratchet when he and the Wreckers will be here?” He received no response. “Right…” he said awkwardly, and quickly walked off, leaving the two alone. Human romance and intimacy was something he was aware of, of course, but he hadn’t been exposed to it before!

Jolt’s heavy, metallic footsteps echoed down the hallway and were dimly noticed by the infatuated couple

“Oh, hell, I’m so sorry, Cait,” Jasper breathed, once the footfalls had faded away. He raised a hand and cupped Caitlin’s cheek. “I shouldn’t have cut you off after Nancy found out.”

“It’s all right.” Caitlin closed her eyes contentedly. “You had a baby on the way.”

“Didn’t matter in the end,” Jasper said, without a hint of bitterness or regret. “The marriage barely lasted another year. You’re the one I missed.”

Caitlin opened her eyes, where he could see tears beginning to pool.

They embraced.

‘Ah, hell,’ Jasper thought. ‘Just do it.’

They kissed.

~8~

“I am Optimus Prime, and I send this message to any surviving Autobots taking refuge among the stars. We are here. We are waiting.”

How many times had he listened to it? Dozens, at least.

It was a simple message. The accompanying data burst, containing coordinates and encrypted information, was much the same. The codes were new ones, but it hadn’t been hard to figure them out. Optimus Prime had not being trying to hide, after all.

Megatron was dead. The Allspark had been destroyed. In the span of a few weeks, of a single message, everything he had ever known was upended.

The second message had been even more interesting than the first. Large, organic creates, on a scale sufficient to rival the Great Guardian Robots? How intriguing. He would dearly love to find out how they worked.

Well, he’d get his chance soon enough.

How long had it actually been since he’d seen them? Almost five hundred thousand vorns, at least.

Not even a single meta-cycle, and he would see them all again.
Not even a single meta-cycle, and he could experiment to his Spark’s content.

He couldn’t wait.
A lone, pink motorcycle drove down the Dwight D. Eisenhower Highway, a few miles outside the town of Elko, Nevada. Its rider, dressed in form-fitting leather, was unmoving, staring directly at the long road ahead. If the drivers of the vehicles passing the motorcycle had been able to look closely at the rider for a few minutes, they would have seen that, every so often, it would flicker out of existence before reappearing a fraction of a second later. But even if a driver had noticed that, they would likely have dismissed it as a trick of the light. The thought that the rider was a hologram, and that the motorcycle itself was the Autobot Arcee, would never have occurred to them. But that was indeed the case.

Arcee was heading to the first energon farm the Autobots had constructed, located near the town of Jasper, to check the integrity of the farm’s nanofilters, and if necessary, replace them. It had been a long drive, but she was now just over an hour from her destination. An hour closer to having to go back to Washington and face her friends again. That was the reason she’d come out here in the first place - to get as far away from Chromia and Elita as possible. She just couldn’t bare to be with them - the guilt was almost overwhelming.

It was stupid, she knew. All three of them had come a lot closer to dying at various points in the War. But there was something about the thought of them dying here, on Earth, after the War had finished, that struck a chord far bigger than she had imagined. Maybe it was because she was the one responsible for what had happened in Lima - her mistake, her blunder. She had known that kaiju blood was toxic, and on some level, corrosive - it had stung when some of it had landed on her back in San Francisco - but Ratchet had said that it was unlikely to pose a significant threat unless they were exposed to it for a lengthy period of time.

Crawling inside a kaiju was more than a small dose, but they should have been fine. They should have had several hours before the situation became bad enough to warrant an evacuation. Except it turned out that the insides of a kaiju were more than just the blood. Muscles, bones, blood - all toxic, all corrosive, even more so when it was alive than when it was dead. It was the perfect living bioweapon, and they’d crawled right into it. Her mistake.

If there was one disadvantage to driving out to the first energon farm to get away from Elita and Chromia, it was that the solitude allowed her internal monologue to go into overdrive, reflecting on the angst of the past three weeks. Still, it was something she needed to do - as humans said, she needed to ‘clear her head’. The drive out to Nevada had been perfect for that, as Nevada itself had been for the energon farm. Constructed in 2009, it had been the sole source of energon on Earth until the seeding of the second farm in New Mexico only a few months ago. For that reason, it was very well protected, with an energy shield strong enough to withstand a prolonged orbital attack permanently activated. Large, concealed gun emplacements dotted its perimeter, which was itself surrounded by a one mile exclusion zone, ensuring that no one could approach the farm without direct authorisation. Many humans had decried the extensive security measures as excessive and a significant cause of concern, but being lax had cost the Autobots significantly in the past, and they...
weren’t prepared to take that risk again. With Starscream still at large, there was every possibility, however small, of him returning to Earth with a Decepticon armada to mount an attack. If he did, an energon farm would be one of their first targets.

Thankfully, such an attack hadn’t eventuated (and Arcee privately doubted that it ever would; Starscream was a first-class coward at the best of times, and was likely taking full advantage of Megatron’s demise), and barring one rather humourous exception, humans weren’t stupid enough to even contemplate getting close to the farm. So, as Arcee made her approach, that begged the question: why were three teenagers standing casually outside the main entrance? Then she noticed two very motorcycles next to them: Elita One and Chromia.

How in Primus’ name had they gotten here before her? And why the frag couldn’t they leave her alone?

Arcee wasn’t cross - she was furious. She aimed straight for Chromia, accelerated, and rammed directly into her blue compatriot, who toppled sideways, transforming as she did so.

“Okay, yes, we persuaded Ratchet to tell us where you’d gone!” Chromia cried out, staring up at Arcee’s headlights. “We’re sorry! But you’ve been avoiding us since Lima!”

Lima. The second site of the fifth kaiju attack. Hammerjaw.

The slimy, odourous insides of the kaiju...the stinging of its blood...the horrifying realisation that it was more toxic alive than it was dead...the relief when Jolt and Drift finally managed to pull them out of the kaiju and into the relative safety of the sunlight...

The guilt that had tormented her since before they had recovered.

Sighing, she transformed and helped Chromia to her feet. “How did you get here before me?” she snapped. “And what’s with the humans?”

“We hitched a ride,” Chromia explained. “A few of the others were flying west. The humans we, um, agreed to give a ride after we, err, ‘intervened’ in a situation.”

“We were blackmailed, you mean,” Elita corrected, now transformed herself. She pointed at one of the humans, a female with a choice of attire that reflected the primary colours of the Autobots present. Her hair, styled with double buns, had a large, pink streak through it. She appeared to be about 16 or 17 years of age, and was staring at all three Autobots with what they all recognised was pure awe. “She threatened to to put the footage of our intervention on the internet.”

“It was awesome!” The girl grinned up at Arcee, completely failing to hide her excitement. “They totally wrecked Vince and his gang of jerks!”

Arcee, all fury forgotten, looked at Chromia with a mixture of amusement and disdain. Chromia had the sense to look guilty. “They deserved it?” she suggested, shrugging hopefully.

“Of course they did.” Arcee glared at her friends for a few moments before another of the humans - a sensible-looking male with a long face partially obscured by his black fringe - stepped forward.

“We’re sorry for intruding,” he said. “Miko’s kinda wanted to get close to the farm ever since she moved here, and she didn’t really give your fellow Autobots - or Raf and I - a chance to object.”

Arcee studied him closely. His facial expressions and brain chemistry indicated that he was earnest; in all likelihood, he was the one who often tried to keep his friends in check, but was dragged into their trouble regardless.
She sighed. The humans were just innocent, savvy teenagers taking advantage of a situation. They weren’t dangerous, and if anyone was to blame for their presence in a restricted area, it was Chromia and Elita. She’d speak to them later. But for now, she had a job to finish - and get back at her friends as well.

“I’m heading inside,” she told Chromia and Elita. “You two wait out here until I get back. I’m sure the humans will have questions that you’ll be very happy to answer.”

“Oh, yes!” Miko exclaimed, immediately turning towards Chromia. “Do you like heavy metal? How much do you weigh? Ever used a wrecking ball for a punching bag?”

Arcee copped one withering look of despair from Chromia before she disappeared into the farm, smirking as she did so. It was a mild form of payback, but payback nonetheless.

~8~

The nanofilters were fine, as it turned out, meaning that it wasn’t long before she emerged from the farm to find Elita still answering inquiries from Jack and the second male - Raf, whose hair seemed to make up for his lack of height. He appeared to have been scrawling down her answers in a notebook. Chromia, meanwhile, was looking very miserable as she continued to cop a bizarre variety of questions from Miko. She looked genuinely unhappy, so Arcee decided to end her fun and quickly put an end to things.

“Alright,” she said shortly, “it’s getting late. Time for you kids to get home.”

“Aww, do we have to?” Miko whined. “It’s been awesome hanging out with you Autobots!”

Arcee didn’t bother replying, simply transforming instead. Chromia and Elita echoed her, much to Miko’s disappointment.

“Come on, one last ride,” Elita said kindly, rolling over to Miko. “I’ll make it a fun one.”

Frowning, Miko reluctantly got on. “See you at school,” she said to Jack and Raf, before Elita revved her engine and zoomed off down the road.

Jack walked over to Arcee. “Uh, thanks, I guess,” he said.

“Don’t mention it,” Arcee replied, and sped off after Elita, with Chromia and Raf close behind her. The three travelled together until they reached Jasper, at which point they split up in order to drop the kids off at their own homes.

“Left here,” Jack instructed, and Arcee made the turn, only for the traffic lights ahead to change to red. Arcee dutifully stopped at the marked line; not having a helmet for Jack was enough lawbreaking on her part for one day.

Another human female was standing by the lights, looking as though she was in the process of walking home. She glanced up at them as they came to a stop. “Hey, Jack!”

Brilliant. Someone had recognised the boy. That was the last thing she needed: questions. If the boy was sensible, he’d ignore -

“Sierra!” Jack said, sounding pleasantly surprised. “Uh...hey!”

Arcee groaned. She really wasn’t having the best of evenings.
“That’s a nice bike you got there,” Sierra was saying. “I haven’t seen you with it before. Is it new?”

“I, um, got it today, actually.”

Despite the increasingly low levels of light as the sun set, Arcee could tell that Sierra's cheeks changed hue ever so slightly. It was a common occurrence amongst humans when they were embarrassed, apparently, and that was proven to be true as Sierra’s next words tumbled rapidly out of her mouth: “Reckon you could give me a ride on it sometime?”

*If Jack says yes to this, then Primus help me, I will leave him right here and he can walk home with his friend…*

Thankfully, Jack wasn’t so stupid as to presume agreement on Arcee’s part. “Ah, no, sorry,” he told Sierra. “It’s my uncle’s actually, and he was only visiting for the weekend. Sorry.” He smiled sadly at a noticeably disappointed Sierra.

Finally, the traffic light turned green.

“Some other time, though? I’ll let you know if he’s in town again!” Jack said hurriedly as Arcee revved her engine and sped off, not particularly caring about causing a rather abrupt ending to Jack’s conversation. Bumblebee had often told her what Sam and Mikaela were like together - ‘flirting’ was the term, if she remembered correctly - and she was pretty sure she’d just experienced it first hand. Ugh.

No one else was ever going to learn about what had just happened, that was for sure.

~8~

It only took her another five minutes to reach Jack’s house, and after another five minutes spent extracting an assurance that he wouldn’t go blabbing about the evening’s events to his mother or to Sierra, she was on the road again, heading towards the rendezvous point several kilometers outside of Jasper. Just like with the energon farm, Elita and Chromia were waiting for her when she arrived.

“We need to talk,” Elita said as she pulled up in front of her.

Arcee transformed. “I know.”

Chromia and Elita briefly exchanged glances, before Elita spoke again.

“Look, ‘Cee,” she said firmly. “We don’t blame you for anything that happened in Lima - no, really, we don’t,” she insisted, as Arcee scoffed, “and if you weren’t being an idiot about the entire thing and had actually talked to us, or even looked at us for more than a second, you’d know that too. We all thought that getting inside the kaiju was a good idea, otherwise we would have objected to it. *None of us* realized just how corrosive the K’aiju was. None of us. Even Ratchet.”

“It’s not like we haven’t come close to dying before,” Chromia added, arms folded. “We just don’t understand why you’re all so uptight about things all of a sudden.”

“You weren’t this torn up about Ironhide and the Wreckers. Frag it, you weren’t even this upset about *Mudflap and Skids*! So what is going on with you at the moment?”

With this, Arcee snapped, days of pent-up emotion refusing to be contained any longer.
“You two are!” she shouted, so violently that Elita and Chromia actually took a step back. “It’s you two, being alive now, after the War!”

She turned away from them and looked out across the landscape. Mountains loomed in the background, with sparse vegetation filling the foreground. Insects chirped under the night sky, which was filled with stars. She’d been to most of them, hunting for the Allspark. But that had been in the 40 million years since the exodus from Cybertron. She was on Earth now, and at this moment, it was the most beautiful place she’d ever seen.

“I still can’t believe that the War’s over,” she said finally, in a voice so soft it was barely a whisper. “Not really. Sometimes I get this sense of panic, of urgency, like we’re still meant to be worrying whether we’ll survive the day, or that there’s a mission with a deadline that we need to complete. It’s hard being here on Earth, where it’s just so...quiet. Where none of us should have had to fight again. We were supposed to live out the life we only dreamt about during the War.

She bowed her head. “Then the kaiju started showing up, and Mudflap and Skids...I couldn’t bare to lose you two as well, not after we’d had the chance to experience life after the War. And if you had...stopped functioning...it would have been my fault. My fault that the lives we looked forward to living for so long would have been cut short.

“I mean look at this place!” She gestured emphatically at the landscape in front of them. “It’s so tranquil...serene...we never saw anything like this on Cybertron. All we’ve known is war. We weren’t lucky enough to have lived through the Golden Age, to be able to mourn what was lost. All we used to be able to do was imagine. But now we can live it too - and I almost made sure we couldn’t even do that.”

“Oh, ‘Cee,” Chromia said softly, and walked over to her friend and drew her into a hug - a human custom that she had taken a liking to. Normally Arcee would scoff at such an action and quickly push Chromia away, but this time she found the act strangely reassuring, comforting even.

“We were scared too,” Chromia continued. “It was terrifying...horrible. But we don’t blame you. Never have.”

“Never will,” Elita added, smiling. “Don’t beat yourself up about it. We’re here now, living our imaginations here on Earth, and that’s what matters.”

Then there was silence, a calm, meaningful silence as the three friends repaired the small crack in their relationship. All was understood. Then:

“Thanks for leaving us to answer the questions, ‘Cee,” Chromia grumbled.

But Elita burst out laughing, and soon Arcee and Chromia were joining her. The small act of retribution was meaningless. All was forgiven.

Three Autobots - three Cybertronian refugees - stared out at the horizon together, remembering. Remembering the War, the unimaginable tragedy of it all. But even with the kaiju threat looming above their heads, they could begin to dream, to look forward to a future where pain, hurt and conflict was no more.

For those brief hours outside Jasper, Nevada, that future had arrived.

~8~

January 27, 2015
It was absolute chaos. People running and screaming, the ground shuddering as the kaiju continued on its rampage, heading straight for the brave individual filming the attack. An enormous foot filled the screen, and the footage cut out.

‘It’s been just over a month since Suva was destroyed by the fifth kaiju attack.’

Barely a building was left standing, with rubble covering the ground – even in the deep impressions carved by the tremendous weight of the kaiju as it had run amok, unchecked.

‘Recovery has been slow. Large areas were contaminated by kaiju blue, and have been cordoned off while biosecurity officials cleanse the area. Rubble is being cleared away, uncovering weeks-old corpses of those who could not escape. Save for the cleanup workers, the island of Viti Levu is completely devoid of human inhabitants, and it’s unlikely that the situation will change any time soon.’

A kaiju skeleton – white calcium monuments jutting out of the sand, the skull rising highest of all, its distinctive shape making it obvious why the kaiju had been dubbed Hammerjaw.

‘The kaiju managed to cross the Pacific Ocean and reach Lima before finally being stopped by the Autobots. But even then, the results were disastrous.’

Three ruined sections of the city, with the charred remains of buildings, and several small spot fires issuing forth clouds of smoke...

The kaiju was writhing in pain, a gaping hole on its back, through which a cable trailed. The cable was glowing, channelling an enormous amount of energy.

‘The Autobots have now twice resorted to using nuclear weapons when fighting a kaiju. On the first occasion, their use was successful. But in Lima, their shots went awry, and have caused significant and lasting damage to the city. Their leader, Optimus Prime, has already faced a United Nations inquiry about their nuclear capabilities, and pressure is growing for them to denuclearise.

Concern is also continuing to mount over their effectiveness in both combat and engagement. With Manila and Suva clear examples of what happens when the Autobots fail to arrive, and Lima a reminder of what can happen if things go wrong, it is clear that the Pan Pacific Defence Corps can no longer wholly rely on the Autobots, and has to present their own solution to the kaiju attacks sooner rather than later.’

Grimacing, Jasper turned the television off and flopped back down on the luxurious double bed. The move to Kodiak Island and his spearheading of the PPDC’s anti-kaiju strategy had given him certain lifestyle benefits, of which his 5-Star apartment was one. He was certainly enjoying it.

A door to his right opened, and Caitlin emerged from a haze of steam, clutching a fluffy pink towel to her chest. But despite her lack of dress, Jasper’s eyes flicked to her own, which looked strangely vulnerable without her glasses protecting them. He’d seen her without her glasses many times, of course, but he didn’t think he’d ever get used to the sight.

“Morning,” she smiled.

Quickly averting his eyes, Jasper grunted in reply.

Caitlin’s smile vanished. “You’ve been watching the news again, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.”
“I told you to stop,” Caitlin said sternly, walking over to the wardrobe and rummaging through it for some clothes. “You only end up getting depressed.”

“They’re still talking about Hammerjaw. It’s been a month!”

“It’s like this with every kaiju attack. The media doesn’t get bored with one until the next arrives.” Caitlin dropped her towel and began to dress with impunity, completely comfortable with Jasper’s roaming eyes taking in every detail of her body.

“I’m finishing the tests today,” she continued. “We’ll know who the pilot of your robot will be by the end of the day.”

“Mech,” Jasper said dully, thoroughly sick of making that correction to everyone he met.

“Maybe you could pop over and say hello? It’d be good for the pilot candidates to meet the man who actually designed the **mech** they’ll be driving in a few days.”

Jasper just grunted again.

Caitlin turned around to face him, fully dressed, and sighed. “You’re worried about finishing it, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Jolt said you wouldn’t be behind-”

“That doesn’t stop me worrying about it!” Jasper snapped. “We lost so much time with him out of the picture, and what if it doesn’t work, and another kaiju arrives and we can’t fight it…” He groaned in anguish.

Caitlin looked at him sympathetically. “I get worried about it too, you know…and lots of other things besides.” She glanced sadly at the bottles of medication sitting innocently on her bedside table. “But I tell myself I’m being stupid, and then I go and make sure I’m not being stupid.” She headed for the door out of the bedroom. “I’ll see you at lunch. Bye!”

“Bye, hon,” Jasper replied, and rolled over in the bed to check the clock. 7am. He still had another hour before he needed to get up…

~8~

Finding a pilot for the prototype Jaeger hadn’t been easy. After relocating to Kodiak Island, the PPDC had received thousands of applications to be involved, and it had taken Caitlin some weeks to narrow the field down to fifty candidates. Those candidates were then brought to Kodiak Island and tasked with moving the robotic armature they’d built in the warehouse in Pittsburgh. If they could move it within ten minutes, they were on the shortlist. If not, they were out.

Stacker Pentecost had managed to move the arm in just over a minute on his first try, and Caitlin had expected to see that replicated with her candidates. To her surprise, only eight posted a time anywhere near Pentecost’s, and even then there was a substantial gap between the second and third ranked candidates. So, for the past couple of months, she had been focusing on the top two: Lieutenant Sergio D’Onofrio and Captain Adam Casey. Both were members of the United States Air Force, and were experienced test pilots. As the weeks progressed, she, with the occasional help from Ratchet, devised a mental training program that swiftly helped D’Onofrio and Casey to be able to consistently move the arm in under 35 seconds. But now, as she’d told Jasper, it was time for the final test to determine which one of D’Onofrio and Casey would be in the Jaeger on the
D’Onofrio, who was generally consistently faster than Casey, did not disappoint, moving the arm in 19.56 seconds, which was a good ten seconds faster than Casey - and a personal record. With such a fantastic result, Caitlin had immediately taken D’Onofrio aside and subjected him to yet another brain scan.

“Just a few more moments, Lieutenant D’Onofrio. You know the drill.”

“I’m fine, Doc,” D’Onofrio said calmly. He was lying shirtless on what Caitlin was pretty sure was an appropriated dentists’ chair, with electrodes attached to his head and chest. “Take your time.”

Caitlin stood to his left, watching as the electrodes fed information to the computer screen in front of her. Her eyes glanced over the screen, and focused on a graph. She frowned.

“Are you obsessive-compulsive, Lieutenant?” she asked.

“No. Why?” D’Onofrio sounded surprised at the question.

“I’m seeing some high dopamine spikes in your caudate nucleus,” she explained. “Your tox levels are clean, so it’s not drugs. That leaves O.C.D or…”

She broke off, flushing a bright red as she remembered what else high dopamine levels in the caudate nucleus could mean. “Know what?” she said quickly. “Forget about it.”

That didn’t go down well with D’Onofrio.

“What?” he said anxiously. “Is it something I should be worried about? O.C.D. or what?”

Caitlin cursed internally. Should never have mentioned anything. Of course it wasn’t O.C.D. “Well…infatuation.”

It was D’Onofrio’s turn to blush. “Oh…” he said, looking away. “Well, that’s awkward.”

Panic started to overwhelm Caitlin. D’Onofrio couldn’t be infatuated with her – she was with Jasper! Jasper, whom she was very content to stay with! “It’s not me!” she protested. “It can’t be me!”

“You’re the only one here, Doc.”

She desperately looked over the data. “It’s obviously a glitch or something.” It had to be. There was no other explanation.

D’Onofrio wasn’t convinced. “If you say so.”

“I’m serious! I can’t! I’m with someone!”

“Look, Doc,” D’Onofrio said, staring right at her. “So I have a little crush on you. Doesn’t have to be a big deal. I didn’t bring it up; I’m just sitting here. You looked into my head.”

Caitlin took several deep, calming breaths. The Lieutenant was right. Just because he had a crush on her didn’t mean it had to be reciprocated. It couldn’t be reciprocated.

But D’Onofrio’s shirtless state was visual proof that, no matter how hard she tried, she could not deny that the Lieutenant was one good-looking guy. His pectorals were quite the sight to behold...
She shook her head, dismissing the unwanted thoughts. “You’re right, Lieutenant. I’m sorry.”

D’Onofrio gave a small shrug. “Hey, put me in the Jaeger for the test and we’ll call it even.”

“Don’t get so excited. We don’t even know if it works yet.”

“That’s why I’m here, right?”

“Maybe…”

The brain scan completed less than a minute later, after which D’Onofrio made a quick exit, leaving Caitlin to look over the results. Aside from the dopamine spikes, D’Onofrio’s neural profile was fantastic, leaving no doubt about his suitability to be the first person in history to test drive a giant mech. Yet a lingering doubt remained: they didn’t know if the mech - the Jaeger - would work. If it didn’t, and something went wrong, then there was every possibility that D’Onofrio would be killed. He knew that of course; he faced this sort of risk all the time. But with the fate of the world at stake...would it really be prudent to risk their best candidate first?

After a few clicks on the computer, Caitlin was staring at the form to authorise either D’Onofrio or Casey for the dry run. It was strange - at the start of the brain scan, she had been absolutely sure that D’Onofrio was going to be the one piloting the Jaeger. But now, after their awkward exchange?

Caitlin entered Casey’s name and hit enter. It would be more better to save their best candidate for later in case something went spectacularly wrong the first time. The fact that she found D’Onofrio attractive had absolutely nothing to do with her decision at all. Nothing.

~8~

Three days later, the moment had finally arrived for the prototype’s dry run - the first real test to see if Jasper’s idea was as workable in reality as it was in theory. It would be the culmination of several months’ hard work - a feat that could not have been achieved without the hundreds of workers who, with the assistance of Jolt, had assembled the monstrous creation. The Wreckers too had volunteered their services, and had in fact loudly pointed out several design flaws, and made several crass jokes about the competency of both himself and Jolt. To be honest, Jasper was quite glad they weren’t around today. No, for this event, it would just be him, Caitlin, Jolt, Ratchet and a few other technicians in the control room - a large, open room constructed on two levels, one for the Autobots, and the other for the humans. A row of computers and instruments lined the far wall, which consisted entirely of glass, through which the testing ground, a large, open plot of land bordering the construction hangars, could be seen.

“Everyone ready?” Jasper asked nervously, cigar planted firmly between his lips. He was biting down on it so hard that it wouldn’t be long before it was severed in two. “Then let’s go.”

“Prototype Jaeger Dry Run, January thirty, twenty-fifteen. Oh-nine hundred hours,” Caitlin announced; Jolt was once again recording everything. “Test pilot Adam Casey will attempt to control Jaeger through a full PONS connection.”

“Going live in five, four, three two, one,” a technician counted down.

“Connection live.”

“Whoa…” came Casey’s voice over the intercom. It sounded a bit unsteady.

“Everything okay, Captain?” Caitlin asked.
“Feels like my whole body’s been petrified. Resistance from the data stream, I take it?”

“That’s right, Captain. Just like with your arm.”

“Give us a moment to open the doors for you,” Jasper added, “then try walking around a bit.” He pressed a button on a keyboard.

A second later, the hangar doors slowly grinded open, revealing the prototype Jaeger to the world for the first time. It wasn’t the most flattering thing to look at: a hulking mass of dull grey metal, bulky and squat. The control section, where the pilot controlled the Jaeger, was incorporated into the chest, with only a few small windows to mark its location, and for Casey to see out of. The shoulders were protected from hypothetical kaiju by expansive sheets of metal that owed their inspiration to some of the Lego Bionicle Bohrok sets that Jasper had found in a garage sale for his son once. But no matter how the Jaeger had been inspired, what mattered now was how it performed.

“Okay, Captain,” Jasper said. “When you’re ready, I want you to try taking a couple of steps.”

“Here goes,” Casey grunted.

The onlookers in the control room watched on with nervous anticipation as the Jaeger jerkily raised its right leg, moved it forward, then placed it back on the ground. Then, slowly, the second leg echoed the first. The Jaeger had taken its first steps!

Relief immediately washed over Jasper, and he grinned with pure delight. But then:

“I, uh...don’t feel...too good,” Casey said. His voice sounded strained, like he was struggling to even say anything.

Right at that precise moment, warning screens flashed on the consoles in the control room, and a piercing alarm rang out.

Jasper’s grin vanished in an instant, and his relief was replaced with pure, primal panic. “What the hell’s happening?”

Caitlin was staring at a computer screen, hands flying across the keyboard. “His motor cortex can’t handle the load!” she said in horror. “He’s seizing!”

Shit.

“Cut the uplink!” he roared.

“I’m trying!” Caitlin shouted back. “It’s not working!”

Behind them, Ratchet and Jolt were also working furiously to salvage the situation - and potentially save Casey’s life. But even they weren’t having any success.

“His connection to the PONS is too strong!” Ratchet cried out. “It’s physically impossible for him to disconnect!”

The world seemed to move in slow motion as the magnificent Jaeger swayed where it stood before careening over forwards and crashing to the ground. Barely half of it had made it out of the hangar. A second later, there was a tremendous crash as Ratchet leapt forward, jumped through the windows and plummeted to the ground himself. For a brief, irrational moment, Jasper thought he was attempting to commit suicide, but the Autobot executed a perfect roll as he hit the ground,
transforming as he did so, and drove straight for the crashed Jaeger.

“Shit,” Caitlin was muttering. “Shitshitshitshit.” She buried her head in her hands.

Jasper’s cigar was finally cleaved in two as he continued to stare out of the window in shock. What the hell had gone wrong? Was Captain Casey okay?

Casey was not okay, as Ratchet confirmed a few short minutes later when he returned with the body. Casey had seized, and badly, but Ratchet suspected that he might have been alive just long enough to die from the fall in the Jaeger.

But there was nothing they could do now except inform the authorities and return Casey’s body to his family. Jasper didn’t know whether he had a wife or kids - and honestly, didn’t want to know. He didn’t need that additional guilt hanging over him. But as terrible as he felt, as terrible as the day had been, they had to continue. If nothing else, the disastrous dry run had exposed a fatal design flaw - the Jaeger needed a steady, stable input from the PONS to remain standing if unsupported. That would be corrected posthaste.

The more pressing question, however, was why Casey had seized in the first place. Ratchet ruled out any sort of deficiency on the part of Casey himself, insisting that the fault must lie with either the Jaeger or the PONS itself. A thorough check and re-check of the Jaeger by Jolt confirmed no mechanical cause, so Ratchet and Caitlin turned their attention to the interfacing system. After just over two weeks of debugging and fine tuning, they turned up nothing. It was at this point that Ratchet had the thought that the fault might be due to the vast difference in the mental load required to operate the single prototype armature compared to the whole Jaeger. Unfortunately, he was called away to aid relief efforts in India before he could expound on the idea.

“You don’t need me,” he told Caitlin just before he left. “Follow the line of thinking to where it naturally concludes, and devise a solution the the problem. You’ll fix it. I know you will.”

That sort of encouragement - from an Autobot no less - provided a much needed morale boost, and she immediately began following his advice, hoping to have some sort of breakthrough in the small amount of time she had left before the demonstration to the PPDC’s officials on February 18. But no matter what she tried, she had no success. It was incredibly frustrating, especially because she felt like the solution would be something glaringly obvious and simple, so much so that it was only a matter of time until she stumbled up on it. But time was not something she had, and on the eve of the demonstration, she finally decided that they should postpone it.

Jasper didn’t take her decision well.

“We can’t, Caitlin,” he said tiredly, lying on their bed. It was late at night, and by all rights they should both have been in bed asleep. She’d just showered after coming from a last minute meeting with D’Onofrio, and Jasper...well, she guessed that he simply couldn’t sleep. Not that she blamed him.

“We still haven’t found out why Casey seized,” she pointed it.

Jasper sighed. “An anomaly, probably, as we’ve already discussed. He had no trouble moving the arm.”

“That was a single limb. This is an entire Jaeger. And Ratchet doesn’t think it was an anomaly. Neither do I.”

“They’re test pilots. They know the risks.”
“D’Onofrio deserves better from us than crossed fingers. There’s no guarantee that things won’t go bad again - and if he dies in front of the Secretary-General, the Jaeger program is finished.”

At this, Jasper glared at her. “If we have nothing to show for what they’ve gambled on us, it’s over!” he snapped. “The test is on tomorrow, and that’s final.”

He rolled over, facing away from her, leaving her to change into her pyjamas and eventually join him in the bed. They didn’t cuddle that night.

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February 18. Demonstration Day. This time around, the control room was even more crowded, with several members of the PPDC, including Secretary-General Kreiger and Representatives Cole and Taylor in attendance. Jolt was the sole Autobot, and was keeping a close eye on proceedings from the lower level, though he popped his head over the edge of the gantry every now and then to instruct one of the many technicians.

Caitlin was sitting at one of the computer consoles, with D’Onofrio’s vitals and neural profile displayed in front of her. The lump of hardware that consisted of the main PONS unit sat a few strides away on her right, just in case she needed to do anything drastic. Jasper was to her left, talking with Krieger. They caught each other’s gaze as the clock struck 9, and exchanged nods.

“Prototype Jaeger Demonstration, February eighteen, twenty-fifteen. ten-hundred hours,” Caitlin said out loud. “Test pilot Sergio D’Onofrio will control the Jaeger to provide a full demonstration of its capabilities to PPDC Representatives.”

The whole thing was feeling rather familiar.

“Going live in five, four, three, two, one...PONS connection live,” a technician said.

“All right, Schoenfeld,” Kreiger said impassively. “Show us what you’ve got.”

Jasper grinned. “I think you’ll like it,” he said, and pushed the button to open the hangar doors.

The Jaeger was revealed to the world for only the second time, the sun glinting off its shiny metal surface. 70 metres tall, it looked huge even from the control room.

“My god,” Taylor whispered. “You’ve actually done it!”

Jasper said nothing, simply turning on the intercom. “Lieutenant, take her for a walk.”

Caitlin shot Jasper a glance, only to be ignored. How could he be so confident that the demonstration would be a success? Did he honestly believe that it would be?

With bated breath she stared at D’Onofrio’s vitals, expecting to see some sign of a seizure at any second. But as the minutes dragged on, everything was fine. Maybe Jasper was right after all. Maybe it had just been an anomaly…

She looked up, out of the window, and almost gasped. The Jaeger now stood in the middle of the testing ground, a long train of cables running behind it back to the hangar, providing its power supply and connection to the PONS. D’Onofrio had done it - he’d actually managed to walk it! The PPDC representatives were very impressed as well, nodding their heads in approval.

“How’s he going, Caitlin?”
Jasper’s question jolted her back into focus, and she looked down at his vitals once more. “Blood pressure’s running a little high,” she replied. “I’ll just check directly. How are you feeling, Lieutenant?”

“Oh, Doc,” D’Onofrio’s voice responded. He was very audibly gasping for breath, and sounded very strained. “It’s just...it’s...not...easy.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his neural activity begin to rise - but well within safety parameters. “I know,” she said comfortingly. “Hang in there.”

“Tell him to try the targeting system and spin up the guns,” Jasper instructed. “Show us what the Jaeger’s capable of.”

“You get that, Lieutenant?”

“Yeah...got....”

D’Onofrio suddenly cut off, and a second later, the same piercing alarm as before rang out. Horrified, Caitlin looked at his vitals - which were displaying the tell-tale signs of a major seizure.

“Lieutenant?” she shouted into the intercom. “Lieutenant? Sergio? Talk to me!”

Behind her, the PPDC representatives were looking grim as the control room exploded into chaos. Jasper rushed up next to her, his confidence completely replaced by panic.

“He’s seizing, isn’t he? Shit!”

“I told you,” Caitlin grunted, as she desperately tried to cut the PONS uplink. But just like before, the pilot’s connection was too strong.

“Is there anything we can do?” Jasper asked, eyes wide. “If he dies, we’re finished!”

And just like that, the answer hit her. The mental load of an entire Jaeger was too much for one person, but for two...?

She burst out of her seat and hurried over towards the main PONS equipment, with Jasper close behind her. “Clear all hard data lines!” she ordered the technicians as she jammed on a headset, feeling the pressure of three electrodes on her forehead. “I need an open channel to the onboard PONS!”

“What are you doing?” Jasper said, utterly confused.

“The neural load is too high. I’m bridging in.”


Caitlin looked him dead in the eye. “We’re about to find out,” she said, and flicked the switch.

The world dissolved into a blue coalescence as information flowed directly into her brain. Memories, thoughts, feelings, sensory data...none of it hers - until it was. A completely different life to the one she knew she’d lived. A childhood spend in Kentucky, a dream to join the Air Force and fly jet planes, and the exhilaration of finally achieving that goal. Strange, undeniably male sensations that were so different and yet so wonderful at the same time. Then came the memories that she recognised, of growing up with her mother, of finding academic success in school and university, of meeting Jasper, of losing him, and the downward spiral of meaninglessness that
continued to suck her in even as she got her dream job at DARPA…

And then, somehow, the world reappeared, only she was inside the Jaeger, looking out of its viewports as the lights inside flashed red...except they were flashing red inside the control room as well, where Jasper was clutching her tightly, shouting at her. But then she was back in the Jaeger… and the control room. At the same time.

It was the PONS. It had linked her mind to Sergio’s. She was experiencing what he was.

It was weird. Strange; utterly unlike anything she’d ever dreamed of experiencing before. She was fully conscious of herself, of her individuality, yet her mind was mixing with Sergio’s, like their consciousnesses were two clouds of gas drifting past each other and mixing to form a new one. Two had become one.

‘Sergio…’ The thought sprang, unbidden, into existence, and inexplicably she knew that Sergio had, in some sense, heard her.

‘Is that you, Doc?’ His reply was surprised, unsure. ‘How are you here?’

‘I bridged in with you. You were seizing.’

‘I’m sorry…I thought I could handle it.’

‘It’s okay, Sergio. I’m here to help.’

‘It’s too heavy, Doc. I’ve already tried.’

‘Not for both of us.’

~8~

“Caitlin...Caitlin…”

Someone was tapping her cheek.

“Caitlin...wake up, it’s all over.”

She slowly opened her eyes to see Jasper, his face was as pale as a ghost, a stark contrast to his warm, brown eyes, which were looking at her worriedly.

“What—what happened?” she asked. “Is Sergio okay?” She realised that they were surrounded by the other technicians and the PPDC representatives. Jolt was to their left, peering over the edge of the gantry.

“Her vitals are all good,” he said. “She’ll be fine.”

“What about Sergio?” she repeated.

“He’s fine too,” Jasper replied. He smiled at her. “You did it. It’s all over. The demonstration was a success! All because of you.”

Caitlin had done it. She’d found the solution, just as Ratchet had known she would. A Jaeger was too much for just one mind. It needed two pilots - and that changed everything.
Caitlin and Sergio begin testing the PONS' ability to connect two human minds together.

Caitlin was hauled off to the medical ward of the Kodiak Island facility mere minutes after regaining consciousness. There she was subjected to a variety of neuroimaging techniques, as the doctors that she herself had hired practically fell over themselves in an attempt to study the brain that had, only a short time ago, become the first to communicate directly with another. Normally, Caitlin would be right there with them, but as they swarmed around her, gushing about her achievement, all she wanted was for them to bugger off and leave her alone to sleep. It seemed that telepathy was tiring - the first observation in a completely new field of scientific study.

The doctors buzzed around her like annoying flies for a good hour before Jasper finally appeared and shooed them away.

"Sorry I took so long," he grimaced, closing the door behind the last of the doctors. "The PPDC Reps were very eager to talk for as long as possible."

"I can imagine," Caitlin said tiredly. She walked over to her bed, sighed deeply, and collapsed on it. "Ugh, I thought they'd never leave."

"You're the darling of every neuroscience lab in the world now," Jasper grinned. "They couldn't resist. Just wait till this gets out."

"Oh god," Caitlin moaned. She would be hailed as a hero, as a genius. She would be asked to write a dozen papers - maybe even a book - and shepherded onto every talk show in the world. She'd have to perform, please, amaze, astound! She couldn't do all that, not when she had the whole world to save and -

"Hey, babe, stop."

Jasper's voice shook her out of her reverie. She was sitting up on the bed now, her hands gripping the sheets so hard that her knuckles were going white. Breathing heavily, she looked up, into Jasper's comforting, brown eyes.

"Everything's going to be alright," he reassured her, resting his hands on her shoulders. His face was inches from hers, and she could smell the familiar scent of a cigar on his breath. "This doesn't have to get out if you don't want it to. We can order them not to - at least for the time being. You don't have to do everything that everyone wants. You can stay here and work on the PONS, just like before."

She nodded, relaxing her grip, and Jasper withdrew, satisfied.

"I'm not some sort of genius," she said quietly. "All I wanted to do was save someone's life." She looked up at Jasper, eyes wide. How could she have forgotten? "Where is he? Is he alright?" she demanded.
"D'Onofrio's here too," Jasper said quickly. "He's shaken up a fair bit thanks to that seizure he had before you patched in, but he'll be fine. He's sleeping at the moment. Which," he added, "is what you should probably be doing too."

Caitlin fell back on her bed again and stared up at the ceiling, her hair spread out on the pillow. "Yeah," she agreed. "My brain's wrecked and...I dunno...it feels weird too."

"I'm not surprised," Jasper said kindly, sitting down on the chair next to her bed. "Connecting to another mind for the first time is bound to feel strange." He paused thoughtfully for a moment, then asked, "What's it like?"

Caitlin pondered the question for a good minute before answering. "It's...different," she said slowly. "Hard to describe, because it's so unlike anything else. I was inside Sergio's mind...I could see what he saw, feel what he felt, remember what he remembered...but not much of it...it's like I've barely scratched the surface."

"It's intimate," she concluded. "The most intimate thing ever."

Jasper raised an eyebrow suggestively. "Wow. Really? More intimate than us in be-"

"Shut up," Caitlin half giggled, half yawned, blushing a bright red as she did so. "Not like that - it's not sexual. It's...well, it's like, for a moment, I knew him better than anyone else. Like I understood him completely."

"And do you? Should I be worried that I'm being usurped?"

Memories of her admiring Sergio's pectorals sprang unbidden from her mind - as did new memories, courtesy of Sergio's mind, of him checking her out.

*The attraction is mutual...*

Caitlin immediately pushed the unwelcome thought from her mind, and forced herself to shake her head. "No, not at all!" she said, a bit more forcefully than she had intended. "It's just faded memories now, and...nothing. A sense of something missing..." She trailed off absently, eyelids slowly drooping until her eyes were closed.

Jasper took his cue. "I better get going," he said, standing up. "I told the Reps I'd get back to them. And you've given Jolt and I a lot of work to do now that we know we'll need two pilots."

"Mmhmm," Caitlin murmured.

Jasper leant over and kissed her briefly on the lips. "I'll visit tomorrow morning. Sleep well. I'm so proud of you!" With that, he headed towards the door, never more glad of the fact that he'd thought of recruiting Caitlin after Seoul. Yet something was bothering him in the back of his mind - something he couldn't quite place...

Not to matter though. It'd come to him eventually.

~8~

Thanks in no part to Caitlin's actions, the demonstration of the Jaeger had been a complete success, impressing the PPDC so much that in their initial talks with Jasper and Jolt, they immediately commissioned the construction of 14 combat-ready Jaegers, with 7 to be delivered by the year's end, and the final seven halfway through the next. All the representatives who had attended the demonstration left Kodiak Island with the promise that they would immediately begin funding
negotiations with the PPDC's constituent nations in order to cover the exorbitant costs that the Jaegers were certain to incur. Their promise bore true, and by the end of the week, all member nations had agreed to fund the 14 Jaegers - with the provision that the Jaeger their money funded was 'branded' as belonging to that country. Russia, the United States, China, Japan, Australia and Canada had been the biggest sources of cash, so the first 7 Jaegers would belong to them. Jasper and Jolt now had the task of working with engineers from all around the world to design Jaegers that would be effective and efficient when fighting kaiju while at the same time reflecting their country of origin.

If that wasn't enough, Caitlin's discovery meant that they also had to completely rework the prototype's drive mechanisms to be suitable for two pilots. That in itself wasn't too difficult - all they had to do was duplicate the existing mechanism - but several issues were raised as a result. Would the pilots have to act in tandem to operate the Jaeger? How much of a Jaeger could one pilot operate by themselves? Could the pilots effectively operate different, separate systems in a combat situation? These logistical issues, among others, would be common to all Jaegers. Finding the answers to those questions would require a lot of time and effort - and both commodities were in rather short supply. To that end, it was decided to hire a couple of people who could oversee the Jaeger's operating system design and harmonisation between the PONS, pilots and drive mechanisms while they focussed on the design and construction of the 'Mark 1s', as the first 7 Jaegers were quickly dubbed. After making some inquiries, several candidates were found, but none were more qualified than the father and son team of Lars and Hermann Gottlieb.

Lars, a German engineer, had built up a significant professional CV, even if his somewhat caustic personality had given him a reputation of being an unpleasant person to work with. But if anyone was able to work effectively with him, it was his son Hermann, who at 25 years of age was already a leading figure in the field of mathematics. He was also an accomplished computer scientist, and was halfway through completing a Master's degree in theoretical physics. He was freakishly smart, to say the least.

"Numbers are fascinating," he said in his interview with Jasper and Jolt. He spoke very good English, with only the slightest of accents betraying his heritage. "To be able to accurately describe the varied phenomena in the universe by simply writing down equations is a privilege we do not deserve. When I look at the universe, Mister Schoenfeld, I see order. Inherent, consistent, logical order." His eyes gleamed with passion as his mouth contorted into what looked to be an awkward grin. "I describe this order with numbers, and have come to the realisation that doing so is as close as I - as humanity - can get to the handwriting of God!"

"I must apologise for my son," Lars quickly cut in, before Jasper could do anything other than stare blankly across the interview table. "Ever since reading Newton he has become preoccupied with the idea of God." He glared at Hermann. "I've told him it's quite irrational, but he insists."

"It's not irrational, Father, it's perfectly logical to believe -"

"But let me assure you," Lars said loudly as his son started to argue, "he's got a brilliant mind behind that thick skull. Quite brilliant, I say."

Jasper wasn't quite sure what to make of the duo, but Jolt had been convinced of their merit, so the Gottliebs were hired. They would begin work for the PPDC at the start of March, to allow time for the PONS to be tested - something that was vitally important, considering that it was originally designed purely to connect a human mind with a machine, not to bridge two minds as well. Given the success that Caitlin and Sergio had, it seemed only natural to ask them to continue. Unfortunately, Caitlin's initial reaction to Jasper's request hadn't been positive.
"I can't be a pilot!" she protested, the underlying sense of apprehension she'd had ever since the demonstration finally bursting forth. "I - I'm just a scientist! I invented the tech, I don't know how to use it! Wh - what if a kaiju comes - I'll have to fight it!"

"No one will make you fight a kaiju," Jasper quickly reassured her. "The prototype's not meant for combat. All you and D'Onofrio will be doing is testing the PONS, and later work with the Gottliebs to integrate it with the two-pilot system. Once that's all done, you can stop."

That had alleviated Caitlin's fears, and so she had agreed to take part in the testing phase. Because she was now an active participant in the experiments, control of the PONS project would, for the time being, be headed up by Ratchet, who had returned to Kodiak Island the day after Caitlin and Sergio had been discharged from the medical ward.

"The biggest problem with the dry run and the actual demonstration was the pilot's connection with the PONS uplink being too strong to override. It was fatal the first time, and very nearly the second," the Autobot informed them, having summoned them to the large storeroom that he had appropriated as his workspace. It was furnished to a scale suitable for a 6 metre tall robot, and they had to walk up a set of stairs to a platform just to be at eye level with him. Equipment, including some that Caitlin recognised as components used in the PONS, was ordered neatly on a few desks, and a computer terminal lined the wall opposite them. Ratchet was pointing at the data displayed on one of its screens.

"Needless to say," Ratchet continued, "I have corrected this oversight by integrating Teletraan into the PONS system. If anything goes wrong - anything at all - Teletraan will disable the uplink. The Jaeger will be immobile, but the pilots will be safe."

"That's all well and good, Mister Ratchet," Sergio frowned, "but being stuck inside an immobile Jaeger while fighting a kaiju isn't what I'd call 'safe'."

Ratchet nodded. "Which is precisely why doing so will trigger ejection protocols. The pilots will be moved into evacuation capsules and ejected from the Jaeger."

"And these will be equipped on the prototype?"

"Unfortunately, no. The control pod's position in the Jaeger's chest means that there is no way to accommodate any ejection method without a comprehensive redesign. You and Caitlin will only be using the Jaeger to test help the Gottliebs in determining how the PONS interacts with the Jaeger - how to control the Jaeger, basically. You shouldn't need to eject."

Despite already knowing this, Caitlin still released the breath she'd unconsciously been holding. As she did, she glanced at Sergio, whom she noticed was looking slightly disappointed. A brief, irrational sense of resentment flared up inside her; how could he find the possibility of fighting a kaiju exciting, when she absolutely dreaded it? The sensation was gone as quickly as it had arrived, but it nonetheless unnerved her. If she was going to be working with Sergio by connecting with his mind, harbouring resentment toward him was the last thing she needed to do.

"...had a look at the scans that were taken just after the successful PONS connection," Ratchet was saying, and Caitlin quickly tuned back in just as he brought up different data on the computer screen. "I was rather intrigued at the fact that such a connection could be made at all, so I cross-referenced the scan results with Teletraan's archives. Listen to this."

Ratchet abruptly muted the computer. "The Zamojin were a typical organic humanoid species, not particularly special on the galactic evolutionary scale," he explained, "but their most notable trait was their high proficiency for telepathy. Given the broad similarities in your neural structures, I think it's quite possible that humans have some low-level, innate telepathic abilities, and it's this that allows the PONS to work."

"Wait," Sergio questioned. "Actual, psychic telepathy is real?"

"Yes," Ratchet stated, as if it were obvious. "Why are you surprised? You've worked with the PONS."

"That's different," Sergio insisted. "The PONS is a machine, not... actual telepathy."

"I can assure that 'actual telepathy' is real," Ratchet said confidently, "which might prove to be a problem, if your species actually do have some sort of telepathic potential."

"Why would it?" Caitlin asked.

"If your species has that potential, then it is entirely possible that you will start experiencing the kind of phenomena the PONS system has enabled, but has no direct involvement with. If that were to happen..." Ratchet fell silent for a few seconds. "Well, it could cause problems. Even if it didn't, we might have to completely change the course of our research and development."

"And you're telling us this now?" Sergio said in amazement. "Great. Just great."

And so later that day, with considerable trepidation, Caitlin and Sergio, with Ratchet's supervision, began the first controlled tests of the PONS' ability to link two minds together. The ease at which they had connected during the demonstration meant that the experiments would, while valuable, be quick and easy.

They were wrong.

To their immense surprise and frustration, the first two weeks of testing were full of pain and frustration as they both lay back on their appropriated dentists' chairs, eyes screwed shut in a vain attempt to make the connection, for the blue coalescence to appear.

Ratchet, on the other hand, wasn't as surprised. "It's likely that Lieutenant D'Onofrio's seizure made it easy to establish a connection," he theorised, after Sergio had stormed out of the laboratory, leaving Caitlin to mull over yet another failure. "You were also under immense emotional stress at the time, so it's possible that your stress hormones are an important factor in creating favourable neurochemical conditions for the PONS to exploit."

"We'd have done it by now if that were the case," Caitlin muttered angrily, yanking off her headset. "It's been two weeks! Lars has been breathing down my neck wanting to know when we're ready to start testing in the Jaeger. We need results now, Ratchet!"

But Ratchet could not offer anything forthcoming, so she turned to her boyfriend.

"Maybe you're trying too hard," Jasper said thoughtfully as they lay in bed together that night. "Like when you're forcing yourself to fall asleep, but you just can't. Your brain refuses until you relax enough."

"The racing mind," Caitlin murmured quietly. "You might be right..."
"I'm just an engineer - what do I know?" Jasper shrugged. "But maybe next time pretend you're preparing to fall asleep. Relax and see what happens."

Jasper spent the following afternoon grinning wildly after Caitlin told him over lunch that Sergio had fallen asleep during their morning session.

Eventually though, Jasper's advice paid off. With both parties relaxing, they both saw brief glimmers of blue in their peripheral vision, and the vague sense of being aware of a presence in their mind. And then, three weeks after they had started, Caitlin's world finally dissolved into a dazzle of blue, and her memories, thoughts, sensations and consciousness drifted gloriously together with Sergio's - only for it to be wiped away in an instant, and leaving her alone in her head once again.

She blinked rapidly, and managed to croak, "We did it!" before she was struck by a sudden onset of nausea, and vomited over the side of her chair onto the floor. Opposite her, Sergio was doing the same.

"Excellent!" Ratchet beamed as they wiped their mouths on their sleeves. "We had a PONS connection for just over two seconds!"

Caitlin and Sergio exchanged glances. They had achieved their goal - they could replicate the connection. All they had to do now was maintain it.

Sergio nodded.

"Let's go again," Caitlin said determinedly.

This time, they held the connection for ten seconds. By the end of the day, it was stable for 5 minutes. By the end of the week, they could connect for over an hour, a feat that meant they were now ready to start testing the Jaeger.

It couldn't have come soon enough for Lars Gottlieb.

"Three weeks I've been waiting for you two," he muttered angrily after letting Caitlin and Sergio into his office. It was small, but compactly furnished. Cupboards overflowing with paperwork lined the walls, with a thick, wooden desk sandwiched in the middle. Lars wormed his way around the many boxes littering the floor, and sat down in a comfortable-looking desk chair that barely fit behind the desk. There were no other chairs in the room, so Caitlin and Sergio stood awkwardly in front of the desk, trying not to knock over a delicately balanced pile of folders as they did. "I gave up my position at TUM for this - and I've been sitting around waiting for some progress on something that already worked the first time! Thank god I was being paid."

Caitlin and Sergio wisely decided to say nothing.

"I have here a list of things we need to test," Lars continued, opening up a file on his computer. "My son has already run simulations that have told us everything we need to know, but your Doctor Schoenfeld insists that you two provide practical examples." He scowled. "So, here's the deal. You get into that Jaeger tomorrow, and you figure out how to drive it."

And so Caitlin rose early from bed the next morning, careful not to disturb Jasper, and made her way to the pilot preparation room in the construction hangar, situated just behind the Jaeger so as to provide easy access to its control pod. There she put on a black undersuit, laced with circuitry that read her body's electromagnetic impulses and relayed them to the Jaeger via the PONS. On top of that, she put on the drivesuit itself: white, bulky, hardened, and distinctly uncomfortable. The
tight-fitting helmet didn't make things any better.

"Looking good, Doc," Sergio said, walking up to her, dressed in his own Jaeger piloting gear.

"I feel like a crab," Caitlin complained, rapping on the arm of her suit.

"Well then, hermit crab," Sergio laughed, "let's step inside the shell."

He guided her out of the room and onto a long gantry leading inside the Jaeger's back. They walked down a long passageway, through the Jaeger's inner workings, and emerged at the rear of the control pod. She had been inside the control pod of the Jaeger many times before of course, but had never imagined setting foot inside of it as one of its pilots. As she did, she looked around, as if taking in the sight for the first time. It was quite small for a machine seventy metres tall, and looked even smaller than it actually was due to the limited number of windows; only six adorned the exterior, providing a very constrained view outside. The Jaeger's control apparatus hung suspended from the section of the ceiling that housed the Jaeger's onboard PONS equipment, and consisted of long, spindly pieces of metal that vividly reminded Caitlin of marionette strings. She suppressed a shudder as technicians surrounded her, screwing the apparatus into grooves on the back of her drive suit, and connecting the thin metal limbs to her wrists and boots. She moved her arm and found that the apparatus restricted her range of movement slightly, to ensure that she couldn't mimic any motion that was outside the Jaeger's operational capabilities.

"Feels weird, huh?" Sergio said, looking over at her as the technicians finished hooking up his own suit and left the control pod. A thick door sealed shut behind them. "It's like Pinocchio or something." He mimed the jerky movement of the cartoon character, squeaking, "I'm a real boy!" as he did.

Caitlin let out a small, nervous chuckle, before the sound of wrenching metal alerted her to the fact that the hangar doors in front of them had begun to grind open. Shafts of light flooded into the hangar, illuminating the Jaeger it contained.

"Lieutenant, Doctor, the path out is clear," Lars said over the radio. "I'm about to initiate your neural handshake. Are you ready?"

Caitlin looked to her right, and Sergio gave her a reassuring smile through the perspex of his helmet. She gulped. "Y-yes," she said shakily. "We're ready."

"Then I shall be initiating neural handshake in ten, nine, eight, seven…"

"Ready to drive?" Sergio asked her, grinning.

Caitlin swallowed the lump in her throat. "No."

"Relax, you'll be fine. I've driven it before – you've done it too, when you bridged in. Remember what it was like then."

"…four, three…”

"Easier said than done," Caitlin muttered. Her memories of their first connection were hazy at best. Still, she took a deep breath, and closed her eyes, hoping that instinct would prevail. It was just walking. It couldn't be that hard.

"…one."

Caitlin's world dissolved in a cloud of blue as her mind was connected to Sergio. Despite its
familiarity after several weeks of testing, it was still considerably disconcerting to have your entire being be connected so intimately to another. Her eyes snapped open as the sudden rush of memories, sensations and thoughts ceased, replaced by a calm equilibrium as their consciousnesses drifted together. She could see herself through Sergio's eyes, and he through hers. She would hear any instructions from Lars through two pairs of ears, but they would move as one, united in mind with a giant machine.

"Prototype Jaeger, you're all clear to take a walk."

Caitlin saw the thought crystalise in Sergio's mind before he said it out loud. "Here we go."

Together, they took the first step.

It was harder than Caitlin had imagined, even after practising on the robotic armature. She felt every bit of the Jaeger's leg's weight as she and Sergio slowly lifted their own, the control apparatus encasing her foot ensuring that they couldn't move it any faster than the Jaeger could respond. Connected to the Jaeger itself via the PONS, they could feel the loss of contact between the right foot and the ground while their own remained firmly inside the control apparatus. It was a strange sensation – feeling two opposing stimuli at once, and for a moment Caitlin wobbled – but she quickly found her balance, and moments later, felt the Jaeger's foot find stability on the ground once more.

Caitlin breathed a sigh of relief. She had done it!

'Well done!' Sergio's thought drifted across to her consciousness. 'Now let's keep going.'

They took a second step. Then a third. The fourth took them out of the hangar, into the bright light of the Alaskan Spring, and the annals of history.

~8~

The sight of the Jaeger walking around the testing grounds quickly became common sight as Sergio and Caitlin, with the guidance of Lars and Hermann, rapidly found the answers to all the questions raised by the dual-pilot system. Although walking required both pilots to act in tandem, raising or moving a single limb only required one pilot to act out the motion, allowing the other to operate the prototype's limited weapons systems.

By the end of March, Caitlin and Sergio had fine-tuned their piloting abilities to such an extent that Jasper was quite frankly amazed that they'd only stepped foot in the Jaeger together only a few weeks beforehand. He'd go up to the observation deck every morning, and watch as they marched the Jaeger around, their movements more confident, more fluid every time he saw them. It was a thing of beauty; his dream realised. He couldn't have done it without Jolt, and he couldn't have done it without Caitlin either. She had cracked the code. The quiet, over-achieving girl in his classes whom he'd fallen in love with had excelled, and was piloting his creation, one of the greatest mechanical achievements of mankind. He couldn't have been more proud.

He could tell that she was enjoying her new responsibilities too. It quickly became commonplace for her to gush about the experiences of drifting every night before they went to bed, recounting the thrill of piloting the mechanical behemoth. He noticed as her smile gradually began to extend to her eyes as well as her mouth, and that as it did, she started taking lower doses of her medication. Before long, she had stopped taking them altogether. The uncertain, anxious, depressed girl he'd recruited from Arlington had been replaced by someone who was energetic, social and, most importantly, happy. The Caitlin that Jasper had known from those blissful days during their affair had returned.
The change was quite remarkable - a complete reversal of the effects of Caitlin's mental illness, which by all appearances, appeared to have been cured. Jasper could only think of one possible explanation for the changes in Caitlin's behaviour, and that was the the PONS connection. Somehow, linking her mind to Sergio's had done what modern medicine could not. Needless to say, such a conclusion bothered Jasper, and he couldn't help but feel somewhat jealous that the Lieutenant was spending so much time in his girlfriend's brain. It had done her a lot of good, but still…

As the days flew by, Jasper's joy of watching the Jaeger began to be significantly diminished as Caitlin and Sergio became increasingly inseparable as they hung out with technicians and other staff during recreation time. To his astonishment, she even agreed to play in the weekend basketball draw and found great success, grinning wildly as she enveloped her teammates in big hugs after they won their matches. She and Sergio were invited to parties on the mainland, only for him to be left behind, working hard on the machines that would save humanity.

As her behaviour became less reserved, so did her appearance. Lab coats were replaced by tank tops, and the long silky blonde hair that he loved was cut into a bob. After an incident on the basketball court, her glasses were replaced by contacts. She began to neglect him, clinging all the more to Sergio instead. It came to the point where Jasper realised that he was losing her, and there was nothing he could do about it. Caitlin's insistence that he didn't have to worry about Sergio had been wrong. He had snatched her away from him - and the worst part about it was that she hadn't even appeared to have noticed. The nightly gushing about drifting experiments had long since ceased, as she was now coming back late in the night, and was too tired to talk about anything. Gone too were the passionate moments of bliss that they had both enjoyed. As Jasper lay in bed, with her body less than a metre from his, he felt more lonely than ever.

"Something's happening to me, Jasper," she said quietly one chilly morning in mid April. She was sitting up in their bed, looking down at the sheets, her cropped hair looking particularly messy after the night's sleep.

To Jasper, who had been about to leave their apartment to start work for the day, she had never looked more beautiful. His heart was wrenched in two as he realised that this day, of all possible days, was the one where she had finally realised that she'd changed. "If it works, you should let it happen," he said, ignoring the lump in his throat.

She looked up at him, her wide, blue eyes betraying a sadness that they both shared. "I'm not talking about the Jaeger."

"Neither was I."

There was silence for a few moments as they both considered what to say next. They both knew what the other was talking about; they knew each other too well for that to be in question. But neither wanted to admit what was actually happening - that their relationship had just ended.

"I never wanted to hurt you..." she whispered, as glistening tears began to fall slowly down her cheeks.

Jasper's throat burned. "I know," he said hoarsely, as he struggled to maintain his own composure. "But I would have if I were you."

They shared one last, final look of mutual pain before he turned and left her sitting in his bed. The tears finally came as he exited his apartment, knowing that even as he would return after a hard day's work, she would not be doing the same. After all that had happened - from the moments of delight they'd shared on campus all those years ago, to the pain of breaking up when his ex-wife
found out; from the rekindling of the fire when they'd first come to Kodiak Island, to the struggles they faced in trying to make the Jaeger work - it had all been for nothing. He'd lost her.

He was still wiping away his tears when he entered his lab, where Jolt was looking over some designs for the Mark 1 Jaegers. "Good morning Jasper," he said absently, tapping a design in front of him. "We really need to have another look at this arm for the Russian Jaeger. The spring mechanism isn't going to -" He broke off, having finally looked up and seen Jasper.

There was an awkward silence.

"Are you okay?" Jolt asked eventually. "You don't seem to be…"

Jasper stood silently in the doorway for several moments. Something had been bothering him since the demonstration, niggling away at the back of his mind. He'd never paid much attention to it before, but now, as he stood before Jolt, it was all he could think about. He needed to know. And so, looking right into Jolt's optics, he asked one simple question. "Did you know?"

"Know what?" Jolt said cautiously.

"That the Jaeger needed two pilots."

Jolt stilled. It was hard to notice, but after spending so much time with him, Jasper did. A feeling curled in his stomach, dark and dangerous.

"You did -" he started.

"No," Jolt quickly interrupted, shaking his head slowly. "Or, at least, we weren't sure of it. Ratchet had his suspicions, but...he couldn't confirm it."

Although relieved that his suspicions had not amounted to anything more, Jasper released a shaky breath. "And you didn't tell her - or even me?"

"It was not a solution we were pursuing, Jasper," Jolt stated, his voice low. "We were still examining methods of reducing the strain on the pilot - we even had a viable option, at one point, but then the test came and Caitlin...well."

"She connected with D'Onofrio." Was that it? He'd lost Caitlin -

"Yes," Jolt continued. "And the result worked. Worked better than could be hoped for, even. The two-pilot system...each one covered for the flaws of the other. Performance was above what could be expected of a single pilot, just from the addition of another point of view, the ability to multitask...I'm sure you've seen how Doctor Lightcap has recovered from her depression, becoming much happier and healthier. Things...were well."

Jolt's optics flicked over Jasper's form, examining him from head to toe.

"Jasper," he said. "I am very sorry about your relationship. I understand that you do not want to hear that from me, but..."

"No." Jasper shook his head. "You're right."

Caitlin...

Jolt was right. For the last few weeks, Caitlin had been happy. He'd seen it himself, as they grew apart, how she changed and became...well, herself again.
"Take a break," Jolt said, after several seconds passed.

"I can't," Jasper shook his head. "Our work - I can't, it's just too important."

"Taking care of your mental health is no less important, Jasper," Jolt pointed out. "Both you, and your work will suffer for it. Take however long you need off, go home, and... do your best to come to terms with it."

"I won't be that easy." Jasper said, his voice a near-whisper.

"No," Jolt agreed. "It will not."

Jasper nodded, slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, alright. I'll... call in sick."

"Best not," Jolt stated. "Not unless you want Ratchet to hunt you down, anyway."

A laugh startled its way out of Jasper, and Jolt smiled in response.

"I'll talk to Ratchet," he said. "You go ahead. If you want to talk about it, I'm here, but if you don't want to talk to me, maybe go find Prime, he's always a font of wisdom -"

"Jolt." Jasper paused for a moment, searching for something to say and only coming up with a single word. "Thanks."

"Of course," Jolt nodded. "Have a good day, Doctor Schoenfeld."

And with that, Jasper turned on his heel and walked quietly out of the room. He had no idea what he'd do or where he'd go, but he knew that he couldn't stay at Kodiak Island. It would be too painful.

It was ironic, in a way. He had chosen Caitlin knowing that he would help her save the world. If only she hadn't ended up hurting him as well.
The First Fight

The journey to Earth was the same as any other: a long period of nothing but cosmic dust, followed by a short and relatively sudden end. Such was the scale of space; years to cross from one star to another, but only several hours at most to cover the distance that the outermost planetoid of the system orbited at to the world he was heading towards.

Well, it would have been a few hours if he had maintained the speed he had been travelling at. That, however, would have been a spectacularly bad idea; an impact while travelling at 96.04% the speed of light could only be described as cataclysmic, and any situation that could possibly lead to such an event should be avoided at all costs. So, just as he passed a planetoid apparently called Pluto, six powerful retro thrusters engaged, assisting his deceleration to a more manageable velocity while he also burnt energon in order to bleed kinetic energy into Transwarp Space. His energon reserves were considerably depleted by doing so, but given that he was so close to his destination, he could afford the loss.

It would now take him approximately five axial rotations of his target planet to reach his destination, but its inhabitants would be well aware of his impending arrival thanks to the luminosity of his retro thrusters. He would appear to be, briefly, a star hanging brightly in the sky, before vanishing.

He felt his Sparks grow restless in anticipation of seeing Optimus and some of his other fellow Autobots again. It had been so long since the Ark and the hunt for the Allspark. It was just a shame that he would be seeing them again on a planet called 'Earth' – still probably the worst name an indigenous population could give to their homeworld. Maybe he would be able to show them the error of their ways when he got there!

~8~

3 Days Later - April 21, 2015

The bay housing the prototype Jaeger was truly enormous; at a hundred metres in height, and several times that in both length and breadth, it was large enough to comfortably contain a city block - buildings included - within its walls. The Jaeger was positioned close to the south entrance, surrounded by scaffolding and gantries as it underwent its scheduled structural assessment. Sitting on one such gantry, fifty metres above the ground, Caitlin stared glumly at the Jaeger barely five metres in front of her as she played absently with her sandwich, taking a small bite out of it every couple of minutes.

She'd come up here for every meal since she'd broken up with Jasper, finding solitude preferable to the crowded noisiness of the mess hall that, only a couple of days ago, she had eagerly immersed herself in. And to be honest, she preferred to be there, but after the break up she needed time to think and reflect. It had been an emotionally tumultuous couple of days.

She took another bite out of her sandwich; a small piece of egg dropped out of her mouth and fell, quickly disappearing out of sight and probably landing somewhere near the Jaeger's right foot.

The damn Jaeger. If Jasper hadn't wanted to build it, he never would have come for her, meaning she would never have invented the PONS or the Drift, and never would have drifted with Sergio. And if she hadn't drifted with Sergio, she never would have fallen for him, and she and Jasper would have never broken up, meaning that she wouldn't be sitting on this gantry feeling guilty.
Jasper hadn't taken their break up well, that was for certain. Why else would he have disappeared from Kodiak Island without so much as a goodbye? Surely he could have at least told her he was going, instead of leaving that job up to Jolt, who had looked about as awkward as she had ever imagined an Autobot looking.

Another bite from the sandwich, this one a lot more forceful than the others.

So Jasper had bailed, and had gone somewhere else for as long as he wanted. Despite Jolt's assurances to the contrary, she half expected him never to return at all.

She sighed. That wasn't fair. Jasper wasn't someone to just give up. He'd come back, and when he did, he'd get right back to working on the Mark One Jaegers. He just needed some time to process what had happened. And to be honest, so did she, but she couldn't afford to take some time off. Unlike Jasper, she didn't have Jolt to cover for her, and without her, the Drift tests couldn't happen at all. No, she needed hang around for a little longer.

The rattle of footsteps on the metal gantry let her know that someone was approaching her.

"So this is where you've been hiding," Sergio said, sitting down next to her, swinging his legs in the empty space under them.

"Yep," Caitlin replied somewhat resentfully. She just wanted to be alone and think! "How'd you find me?"

"Our Drift this morning. I got a glimpse of the Jaeger and figured you were up here somewhere. I'm surprised, actually - you managed to stop me from seeing it for two days. Should I be impressed?"

Caitlin let out a wry grin. "I suppose. Wasn't easy."

"I bet it wasn't," Sergio chuckled. He put his arm around her shoulders. "I'm worried though, Cait. You haven't been yourself since -"

"Since we started Drifting."

"Well, yes..." Sergio admitted. "But more recently. Since Jasper."

Caitlin glanced pointedly at her watch. "Shoot, it's almost one," she said, unwinding Sergio's arm from around her. "We need to go get changed." She pushed herself to her feet, taking the last, hasty bites of her sandwich. "See you in the lab," she managed to mumble, despite the half-chewed bread, egg and lettuce in her mouth.

"Caitlin!" Sergio called after her as she fled down the gantry. "I get that you don't want to talk about it, but I'm gonna find out anyway! You may as well tell me!" She turned the corner, disappearing out of sight. "It'll be easier," he finished lamely, before sighing and heading off to get changed himself.

"You're late," Lars Gottlieb said pointedly when Caitlin entered the PONS testing lab at four minutes past one.

"Spare me the grumps, Lars," Caitlin said, walking past him and lying down in her recliner. "Really not in the mood."

"I can tell," Lars muttered, walking over to her and fitting her PONS headpiece on her head. "You've been in a foul mood ever since Doctor Schoenfeld left."
Caitlin sighed. She'd noticed that she was being a bit more irritable these past couple of days. "I know," she said sadly. "It's been...difficult. I'm sorry."

Lars just grunted, though Caitlin wasn't sure if it was in response to her apology, or the fact that Sergio had just walked in the door. Of course, he didn't get a snide remark about tardiness…

Lars turned his attention to Sergio, and a few minutes later, they were ready to commence another Drift test. Lars now stood behind a console, eyes darting over computer displays as Caitlin and Sergio lay opposite each other in front of him.

"Okay," he said. "Non-Jaeger PONS test one-six-seven. Initiating neural handshake in five, four, three, two, one…"

Caitlin closed her eyes as the now familiar sensation of her mind connecting to Sergio's overwhelmed her. Thoughts and desires flooded her mind as she was treated to a crash-course of Sergio's life, from his growing up on a farm in Kentucky, to the day when he first met her. Some memories she'd seen many times before, but others were new, giving her a greater understanding of the person lying opposite her.

"Hey…" Sergio said to her, communicating via the Drift. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry about earlier."

"I know...I can feel it…"

"No hard feelings?"

"No. Pretty sure this wouldn't work if there were…"

Across from her, Sergio smirked. "Knew you couldn't stay angry at me."

"Shut up..." She blushed, watching through Sergio's eyes as her face reddened slightly.

"PONS link strong and holding," Lars announced. "You two lovebirds holding up okay?"

"Yep," Sergio nodded.

"Yes," Caitlin echoed, eyes briefly darting to Lars before landing back on - Jasper?

"If it works, you should let it happen," he said softly.

Caitlin blinked and looked around. She was sitting up in their – her – bed, staring up at Jasper, trying to contain the tears that threatened to fall down her cheeks. "I wasn't talking about the Jaeger," she found herself saying.

"Caitlin?" Sergio's voice echoed faintly in the background.

"Neither was I," Jasper replied.

She couldn't contain it any longer, and the tears were released. "I never wanted to hurt you," she said softly, yearning for him to believe her. It had been so gradual, so unexpected – she hadn't even realised it until a few days ago –

"Caitlin, what's going on? What's - what is this?"
"I know," Jasper said, sounding as if he was barely holding back tears himself. "But I would have if I were you."

She watched him as he left, then stared down at the bedsheets as she heard him open the door and leave their apartment - his apartment. She couldn't come back here now. They were finished.

"This is when you and Jasper broke up...But how?"

She'd have to find somewhere else to go...move in with Sergio, perhaps? No, not immediately. That would be too awkward, and a slap in the face to Jasper. Give it some time, a couple of weeks maybe. Then they could finally make official the bond that weeks of being inside each other's minds had forged.

"Cait, it wouldn't be awkward at all..."

She let out a shaky breath. Breaking up with Jasper had left her able to admit, without feeling guilty, that she loved Sergio. And it felt wonderful.

"Okay, seriously, what the hell is going on?"

But Jasper…

A new wave of guilt and anguish washed over her, as the sight of his pained face etched itself into her brain. Memories of her university days, of their affair, of them coming together again, resurfaced, reminding her of what she'd just thrown away. Was she a terrible person for doing this to him? Had she cheated on him?

"No! None of us had any idea what the experiments would do!"

"I'm sorry, Jasper," she murmured, before the world around her collapsed in on itself. She screamed; her brain was on fire, pounding relentlessly against her skull, trying to force its way through -

And then she was opening her eyes, staring up at the relieved face of Sergio. Her ears picked up the beeping of equipment, and with a sinking stomach, she realised she was back in the medical wing.

"Ugh..." she groaned. "How long?"

"Few hours," Sergio replied. "Lars managed to shut the PONS down, but you were screaming your head off, so we took you here right away. Ratchet's checked everything: no lasting damage, thank god, but no more testing today." He paused, biting his lip in that cute way he always -

Caitlin suppressed another groan. How typical of her. If she was able to recognise that Sergio was being cute, then she wasn't that hurt at all. Her head was still throbbing away, but she'd had migraines that had been far worse.

"...happened?" Sergio was saying. "It was like I was in the room with you and Doctor Schoenfeld when you...when you..." He trailed off awkwardly.

"Broke up," Caitlin said flatly.

"Yeah..." Sergio said slowly, before sighing. "Look Cait, I know it hurt you to break up with him, but it was the right thing to do. And I don't mean to intrude - really, I don't - but it's a bit hard not to when we're sharing our minds. But please, I'm not going to hurt you, and I'm not going to tell
anyone else what I see in your head. I just need you to trust me. You think you can do that?"

Caitlin stared up at him, at his rugged, handsome face, with just the slightest trace of stubble lining his chin. It was the face of the man she'd fallen in love with, the man she knew far more intimately than anyone else on earth, and the man who knew her likewise. If there was anyone she could trust, it was him.

"Yes," she said. "I can do that."

Sergio visibly relaxed. "Good, good," he said, smiling happily. "Just wanted to clear that up. Now...what the hell was that last drift?"

Caitlin frowned, thinking back. She'd relived her breakup with Jasper, but it had been so vivid, so real, like she had been there again. "It was a memory..." she said slowly. "But a full one, not the usual fragments. Some sort of total recall, maybe? I don't really know."

"Why did it happen though? And why now?"

Caitlin shrugged. "Dunno. Stress? Guilt? Chance? It's been a bit rough for me recently, so maybe..." She trailed off, shrugging again. "I'll need to look into it in any case. See if I can isolate the cause."

"Hopefully it's just a kink that we can quickly iron out," Sergio said, patting her hand. "Wouldn't want our performance in the Jaeger to be impacted, especially with another kaiju due soon."

Caitlin swallowed. A kaiju? A few weeks ago, the thought of fighting one in the Jaeger had terrified her. Now though? She couldn't deny that the idea was somewhat attractive.

"No," she said quietly. "We definitely wouldn't."

~8~

April 23

Kaori Koyamada could think of several times in her life where she found herself in a situation and wondered just how she'd managed to get there. This was one of those occasions.

It had all started some weeks ago, when the fledgling Pan-Pacific Defense Corps had suffered a data leak that revealed the existence of an alien portal at the bottom of Challenger Deep. Naturally, there had been considerable public uproar about this revelation, with several riots breaking out in cities bordering the Pacific Ocean. But as the world demanded answers, her boss, Shao Liwei, saw the whole situation as an opportunity.

Kaori didn't know much about Liwei, even after working for him for the better part of a decade, but she did know that he was a ruthless businessman, and that the success of his company and her employer, Shao Industries, could be attributed to some sketchy business practices on his part. Rumours trickling down the corporate grapevine suggested that he and the Human-Autobot Liaison Team did not get along well, for reasons that were often left to the imagination. Kaori tried not to think about these things; as far as she was concerned, her job as a signals analyst gave her a substantial paycheck and other nice, comfortable perks as well. If Liwei wanted her to do something, she'd do it.

And that was how she ended up in a small submarine, sneaking past a PPDC blockade around the Marianas Trench, descending to the depths of Challenger Deep to take the first corporate look at the kaiju-spewing portal at the bottom. The sub itself was about the size of a car, but the insides
were much smaller, with barely enough room to accommodate a two-man crew. A reinforced concave glass viewing bubble made up the front, behind which the pilot, Mihoko, sat controlling the sub as it made its slow descent. Kaori was curled up half a metre behind her, uncomfortably contorting her leg so as to gaze out the small circular viewport that made up part of the floor beneath her. To her right was a row of complicated-looking instruments that she would be using to record any data she could about the portal - once they got there.

The journey had been slow going, and more than once Kaori had wished that she'd brought something to read. She'd tried talking to Mihoko, but the young girl claimed to be too busy controlling the sub to engage in conversation.

Kaori snorted. How hard was it to control a sub, especially when all they were doing was sinking really, really, really slowly? Had Mijoko ever heard of something called multitasking?

"You been driving submarine's for long?" she asked in her native Japanese. The one thing she had managed to learn about Mihoko - from a random technician back on the transport boat - was that they shared a home country.

"A few years," was the curt reply.

Kaori sighed, and checked the depth meter. They had finally reached the ten thousand metre mark, which meant they had less than a kilometre to go until they reached the portal. She spent the next half hour staring glumly out the bottom viewport until, gradually, she began to notice tiny, strange creatures swim below her. She glanced up, and to her delight was able to make out rock formations through the viewing bubble. The portal was close.

Five minutes later, they had reached it. The sub passed over a rocky outcrop, and bright orange light instantly flooded it. Squinting, Kaori stared through the viewport on the floor, and found herself looking at the portal.

"Wow…" She couldn't help it; the sight of the portal, in its swirling orange majesty, was incredibly beautiful, entrancing even. She stared at it, enthralled with the frothing energy and lancing electricity for several minutes before she forced herself to look away. She had a job to do, but first they needed to get a little closer.

"Take us down a bit more," she told Mihoko.

"I can't," grunted Mihoko, who was gripping the control stick so tightly that her knuckles were turning white. "Water's too turbulent."

Kaori growled in frustration. They were, by her estimation, still a few hundred metres above the portal. Surely they could get a little bit closer? "Are you sure?"

Mihoko gave her a brief, withering glance. "You want to drive?"

Kaori didn't argue the point. It might not be the ideal situation, but given the circumstances, data from this far away would have to suffice. She switched her instruments on.

Nothing.

Kaori frowned.

There - a brief spurt of data, followed several seconds later by another! Success! Kaori stared greedily at the data coming in, imagining all the information that could be gleaned from it once they had returned to Shao Industries. Information from another dimension - the applications could
be endless! It could usurp energon as the talking point of the scientific community - and it would all be down to her, journeying at great risk to the very place the PPDC and Autobots had declared off limits. Perhaps the data she was collecting could be used to find a way to stop the kaiju! She would be famous. Kaori Koyamada, winner of a Nobel Prize…

Lost though she was in her daydreaming, something caught Kaoria's eye. The data - she was getting so much of it! It was flooding in many times faster than it had been only a few seconds previously! What was going on?

Kaori immediately glanced down through the floor's porthole, and gasped.

This drew Mihoko's attention. "What? What is it?" she asked, still furiously grappling with the sub's yoke.

But Kaori didn't reply; she was too busy staring, slack-jawed, at the orange energy swirling below. A crack had appeared in the fiery maelstrom, and as she watched, that crack grew bigger and bigger. The lancing electricity increased in frequency, punctuating the orange with bolts of white so often that it was hard to see anything clearly. Then, abruptly, the electrical storm ceased, revealing a gaping wide hole, around which the orange energy now formed a border.

The portal had opened, Kaori realised. She was seeing whatever lay on the Other Side, not that she could actually see much. Just a dark, murky blue and a mottled brown object that appeared to be getting closer, rising up from whatever dimension formed the Other Side.

Then the object looked up, and she saw its four glowing eyes.

"Argh!" she cried, jumping back and breathing heavily. It was a kaiju. Of course it was a kaiju. Shit.

"What did you see?" Mihoko demanded.

"Never mind that," Kaori said quickly. "We need to get out of here. Now!"

"Why? Wha –"

"Now!"

This time Mihoko obeyed, and the submarine immediately began to ascend – slowly.

Kaori cursed. "We need to go faster!"

"I'm going as fast as I can," Mihoko snapped. "What's the matter? We only just got here!"

"Kaiju!" Kaori shouted, eyes wide and panicked. "There's a kaiju coming up through the portal right now!"

Mihoko turned to look at her, her face a ghostly white. Kaori returned her gaze, and nodded fearfully. Mihoko audibly gulped, and turned back to the controls. A moment later, their ascent speed notably increased, although it was still painfully slow.

"Come on," Kaori muttered anxiously to herself. They were going too slow; the kaiju would be on them in seconds.

She had no time to lose.

Her hands flew across a keyboard to her right, eyes darting to and fro across the screen displaying
the data that her many instruments had detected only a few minutes ago. She hastily collated them
together, hoping fervently that she hadn't missed anything, compressed the file, and began the
upload to the Shao Industries server.

It was a last ditch attempt to get the data to Liwei, and there was no guarantee it would work this
far underwater even with the signal boosters attached to the sub. But she had no other option. She
would likely be dead within minutes - seconds, even - and the submarine destroyed.

Tearing her eyes away from the upload window, which was still attempting to connect, Kaori
instead turned her gaze downward to the porthole below her.

A huge, wiry claw was reaching straight for her, stretching out from the leviathan below her. It was
30 metres away...20...10...

Kaori closed her eyes, waiting for the end.

*Whump.*

The sub shook violently and accelerated rapidly upwards, but the sound of wrenching metal and the
explosion of decompression never came.

Tentatively, Kaori reopened her eyes to see the sub completely intact, the file still attempting to
connect to a server, and Mihoko continuing to grapple with the controls.

"The kaiju's got us in its claw," she grunted. "I'm trying to get us out, but it's too big!"

All that was visible outside of the viewing bubble in front of Mihoko was the mottled brown skin
of the kaiju. The sight sent shivers down Kaori's spine; any second now, the kaiju could exert the
tiniest amount of pressure and pop their sub like a child's balloon.

But it never did. It kept pulling them up with it as it rose, making the journey that had taken them
hours in only a few minutes. Automatic machinery kicked in, working overtime to compensate for
changes in external water pressure that were much more rapid than usual. And, to Kaori's immense
belief, the sub's instruments finally connected to the Shao Industries server, and the data began to
transfer.

But, trapped inside a submarine that was caught in the clutches of a kaiju, there was no guarantee
that they would last long enough for the transfer to be completed.

~8~

"Visual confirmed: kaiju is at our twelve o'clock. What d'you think, Duc? Is he bloody huge or
what?"

"Definitely bloody huge," Duc Jessop replied, staring out at the kaiju rising from the depths of the
ocean, its monstrous form somehow graceful as it moved its limbs in massive strokes. 'Bloody
huge' was an understatement; the pictures and videos of all the previous kaiju had nothing on
seeing one in the flesh. Four limbed, with both arms ending in three very long, spindly claws, this
kaiju had a tall, wide, cylindrical head that reminded Duc strongly of a tree trunk. Quite fittingly,
its skin was bark-brown, with light-green accents on its claws and spiked shoulders. Four eyes
glowed blue in the murky seawater, the larger ones positioned above the smaller pair, all staring
upwards as the kaiju continued its ascent.

Duc and his co-pilot, Graeme Hartley, had been deployed in a small, two-man submersible
designed specifically by the PPDC to track kaiju and, courtesy of the dozen torpedos it housed,
serve as a 'distraction' if necessary. They had been alerted to activity in the portal only a couple of hours ago, and had been immediately deployed from one of the PPDC aircraft carriers making up the blockade around the Marianas Trench. They'd been sitting at a hundred metres below sea level for most of that time, doing nothing but watching the fish swim by, courtesy of their sub's headlights and what little moonlight penetrated this far beneath the waves. It had all seemed rather pointless, but the PPDC was so anxious not to lose track of this kaiju and see a repeat of the Suva disaster that deploying two lowly captains much earlier than needed was an easy decision to make.

But now the kaiju had finally emerged, and made the ascent to near the surface startlingly quickly. They watched as it speeded up from the deep before stopping, treading water at roughly the same depth as them. Its head turned back and forth, as if considering its surroundings, before its powerful legs kicked into motion, propelling it smoothly towards the north east.

"All right," Duc said, "it's an ugly son of a bitch. Let's keep half a klick behind him and see where he goes."

They did so for half an hour, before Graeme suddenly let out a cry of alarm.

"Duc – is that – no way – is that a sub?!

"What? Where?"

"In it's right claw. Holy shit."

Frowning, Duc looked closely at the kaiju again, and to his utmost terror, spotted what was unmistakably a small submersible wedged between the three claws on the kaiju's right hand. Next to the behemoth carrying it, it was so small and insignificant that he doubted that he would have ever noticed it had Graeme not pointed it out – and it was a miracle that Graeme had even seen it in the first place.

After letting out a suitable stream of profanities, he opened a radio channel in an attempt to contact the trapped submarine. "This is PPDC submersible, call sign Alpha Dog, hailing the distressed submarine!" he said urgently. "What is your status?"

A short burst of static was followed by an unintelligible reply.

"Sounds Japanese," Graeme noted.


The was a brief moment of silence as mission control considered the situation.

"Alpha Dog, you are to maintain a safe distance and observe only," came the answer. "Do not engage. Over."

"But we can't just stay back!" Duc protested. "They're as good as dead if we don't do anything!"

"I repeat, Alpha Dog, do not engage. The Autobots have been notified and are enroute to your location. They will be there within the hour. Over."

Duc sighed. "Roger that, Kennel House. Over and out."

"That's cold," Graeme said quietly.
"Yeah," said Duc, as he stared straight at what little he could see of the sub. Its lights were on, but they were flickering ominously. It definitely didn't look as though they would last the hour.

But orders had to be obeyed, so they followed behind the kaiju for what felt like an eternity, no one daring to talk as the minutes ticked away with no sign of the Autobots.

Then the sub's lights went out, and immediately, Duc made up his mind.

"Screw this!" he said. "They need our help! You with me?"

"Sure am," Graeme said determinedly. "Where d'you want me to hit?"

"Anywhere but the claws. Just want the thing to let go of the sub so we can follow it up with a few more torps to get some distance between them."

"Easy," Graeme said, and launched a torpedo.

The projectile was ejected from its tube with a flurry of bubbles, and glided through the water to its target.

"Got him," Graeme announced with no small amount of gleeful satisfaction as the torpedo impacted the kaiju's back, exploding spectacularly.

But the kaiju didn't relinquish the sub. Instead, it manoeuvred itself around so that it was facing Duc and Graeme's submersible. It had noticed them.

Graeme's glee was instantly replaced by fear. "Uh, Duc…"

"Let's back away," Duc said slowly, and quickly put the engines into reverse, hoping that a slow retreat wouldn't prompt any aggressive action from the kaiju.

The kaiju was treading water as it considered them, as if wondering precisely what to do with the small, insignificant machine that had caused it a fleeting moment of pain. It was an unnerving sight.

"Alpha Dog, this is Kennel House." Duc's radio sprang to life. "What's going on down there? We picked up a temperature spike. Remember, you are not to engage. Over."

Duc grimaced and spoke into his mike. "We engaged the kaiju, Kennel House. We are currently moving slowly back -"

"Look out!" Graeme shouted, cutting Duc off.

Duc looked up to see the Japanese sub hurtling towards them - the kaiju had actually thrown it at them so fast that in the milliseconds since Graeme had called out, it had almost crossed the distance between them. "Brace for impact!" he shouted, and moved into the brace position. A split second later, the submersibles collided, and everything went black.

~8~

Spurred on by his conversation with Jolt, Jasper had returned to his room, packed his suitcase, told the Gottliebs that he was leaving for a few days, and took the next flight to Anchorage. He considered continuing on to Pittsburgh, but painful memories of his times with Caitlin there quickly dispelled that idea, so he ended up going to Vancouver instead. It was sufficiently far away from Caitlin, yet close enough that he'd be able to return to Kodiak Island on short notice if he was
needed.

He got into Vancouver in the middle of the afternoon, and spent the rest of the day in his hotel room, lying on bed watching cable TV, feeling rather depressed. Waves of heartbreak and loss crashed over him quite frequently, and he worked his way through a considerable portion of the tissue box provided in his room as a result. Dinner was a messy affair, consisting of room-service pizza with a texture so bland that he actually wished he was eating the PPDC meals back on the Island. He certainly wouldn't be complaining about the egg and lettuce sandwiches again!

Getting to sleep was hard, and it was only after what felt like hours of intermittent crying that unconscious bliss finally claimed him. But after waking the next morning and seeing the huge pile of tissues in the bin, Jasper decided that he'd had enough pining. It was no use feeling sorry for himself; what had happened had happened, and there was nothing he could do about it. He was in Vancouver on a holiday, so he may as well go and at least try to enjoy himself.

So for the next four days he visited all of Vancouver's tourist hotspots and found himself thinking about Caitlin less and less as the days went by. There was something about the hustle and bustle of the metropolis that helped him take his mind off recent events, and he allowed himself to be wholly absorbed into the frantic movements of Vancouver's tourists, barely giving himself time to slow down and think as he hurtled between tourist attractions. It was certainly a big difference from being cooped up inside various facilities working on the Jaeger Program, and as he sat outside a cafe, a coffee in one hand and a half-chewed cigar in the other, admiring the beautiful Vancouver skyline, he realised he was feeling something he hadn't felt in months: relaxed.

"Take however long you need off," Jolt had told him. Jasper hadn't really thought about how much time he'd need away, but given Jolt's generous concession, he didn't think he'd be heading back anytime soon. The Autobot would manage just fine without him, and the Gottleibs would continue the tests with Caitlin and Sergio. There was nothing for him to worry about.

That sentiment only lasted a few hours, as that night he was roused from a fitful sleep by the sound of his phone ringing. Cursing, he rolled over in his bed and fumbled about for the phone, finding it on the floor underneath his clothes from the previous day.

"Hello?" he yawned, too tired to be angry with his early-morning caller.

"Jasper! Thank Primus!" It was Jolt, sounding quite alarmed. "You need to get out of Vancouver immediately! There's a kaiju coming!"

It took Jasper's sleepy mind several moments to process what he'd just heard. "A k-kaiju!" he stammered. Adrenalin immediately flooded his system, dispelling any symptoms of tiredness. He was wide awake now, and absolutely terrified. "A kaiju!"

"A kaiju," Jolt confirmed. "Teletraan picked it up as it came through the portal about an hour ago. It's heading to the north-east; we don't know if it'll hit Vancouver directly, but either way, you need to get out of there!"

"Shit!" Jasper swore, jumping out of bed and almost tripping over his feet in an attempt to locate the pile of yesterday's clothes once again. "How do you know where I am?"

"I tracked your phone. Listen, I'm going to have to go, but whatever you do, don't stop until you're well clear of the city, or I ring and say it's safe to go back."

Jasper hurriedly put his phone on speaker and chucked it on the bed as he wrestled his shirt on. "What's happening in Kodiak?" he asked loudly.
"We're trying to narrow down its landfall point so we can co-ordinate our response. Some of the other Autobots are in Australia and Chile, so it will be a while before they can get to the west coast, so..." He trailed off.

"So? So what?" Jasper demanded.

"So we're thinking of deploying the Jaeger."

"What?" Jasper exploded. "You can't do that! The Jaeger's just a prototype – it's not built for combat! Jolt, I don't want that Jaeger going anywhere!"

"It's just something we're considering," Jolt quickly reassured him. "There's no guarantee it'll even happen. Look, I really need to go now, but I'll keep you informed. Now get out of there, and good luck."

He ended the call.

"Dammit!" Jasper hissed. How the hell could they be thinking of deploying the Jaeger? It was utter madness – the thing barely walked, and had a huge power cable trailing behind it! If the cable was damaged, then the Jaeger – and Caitlin – were as good as dead.

But there was no time to fume about the decisions being made on Kodiak Island. If a kaiju was heading towards Vancouver, then a hotel in the middle of the city was the last place he wanted to be.

It took him two minutes to burst out of his room and take the elevator to the ground floor. A quick check of his phone showed him which way east was, so after leaving the hotel he turned right and ran.

He had barely made it further than a block before his phone rang again; he answered it, expecting to have an update from Jolt, but instead heard an automated voice message.

"Attention, attention, this is an emergency! A kaiju has been detected heading towards your location, and is expected to make landfall within the next few hours. The Pan Pacific Defence Corps advises you to follow your Kaiju Attack Plan by immediately commencing a safe, orderly evacuation to your location's dedicated evacuation zone. Leave all pets and non-essential belongings behind. Standby for further information and updates."

Mass panic began soon after. Cars zoomed past, with the anxious faces of their occupants pressed against the windows, their eyes staring wildly out into the night, watching as people flooded out into the street. Most wore their pyjamas, carrying nothing but the clothes on their backs. Others, despite the PPDC’s alert, were carrying small bags, and a couple were even pulling large suitcases behind them. Jasper soon found himself in the middle of a large crowd, being pushed onwards. It was the most uncomfortable experience of his life, and the rising levels of anxiety he was feeling didn't help.

He soon lost all track of time; he had no idea how long it had been since Jolt had called him. The sky was still dark, with no hint of sunrise. The crowd, however, had come to a halt. Evidently a bottleneck had formed up ahead. Brilliant.

He stood, impatiently, for a good while before his phone rang again. This time it was Jolt, and he hastily answered the call. "Jolt, what's happening? How far away is the kaiju?"

"Caitlin and Sergio are deploying in the Jaeger."
A dreadful feeling of numbing cold washed over Jasper from head to toe. "What?"

"They're suiting up right now. They're going to fight the kaiju."

"I told you, Jolt: I don't want that Jaeger going anywhere!" Jasper snarled.

"And I passed on your wishes to Caitlin and Sergio, but they insisted. Jasper, this is exactly what we've been working for all these months! Why not put it to good use?"

"Because it was not designed to fight! It's a proof of concept!" Jasper couldn't believe they were actually going to do it. He just couldn't. "The power core - the Jaeger needs a fat cable to a fixed power core to even operate! How are you even going to get it - and the Jaeger - here?"

"I've rigged up a system," Jolt said. "We're using two of our dropships to transport the Jaeger, and another for the power core."

Jasper cursed. Trust the engineer to come up with creative solutions. "Fine," he said. "But can I at least talk to Caitlin?"

There was a brief but poignant pause. "Jasper," Jolt said gently. "I don't think that's a good idea -"

"Don't you tell me what's a good idea or not, Jolt," Jasper snapped. "Put me on to her!"

The line went silent for a few moments, before:

"Hello, Jasper."

The sound of Caitlin's voice brought a fresh wave of anguish, and Jasper had to fight hard to quell the tears pooling in his eyes as he continued. "Caitlin, you can't do this! The Jaeger's just a prototype! It wasn't built for this!"

"This is exactly what it was built for." She sighed, her breath sounding like a rush of static across the connection. "I know the past few days have been...difficult...for you, Jasper, and they've been hard for me too. But please don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"But this is real! This is no test run! If you don't kill the kaiju it will kill you! And I - I can't lose you. Not anymore than I already have."

"I'm sorry, Jasper. But I need to do this. I'll see you in Vancouver."

"Wait, Caitlin!"

But he received no response from her.

"I want to watch," he said, once Jolt was back on the line.

"I thought you might." Jolt sounded almost amused. "I've already asked Crosshairs to take you up in a dropship once he and a few others have finished helping with the evacuation. Head to the top of the nearest building and he'll pick you up from there."

Jasper sighed in relief. "Thanks Jolt. And...," he added, swallowing a lump in his throat, "good luck. With everything."

"Thanks. Now trust her. Please."

The call ended.
Jasper pocketed his phone and immediately began pushing his way through the crowd so he could reach an apartment block on his right. It wasn't easy, and people protested, but eventually he made it. Thanks to the evacuation, the building was unlocked, and he was able to run inside and take the lift up to the roof.

On any other night, the sight of the glimmering lights of Vancouver would have been beautiful. But Jasper wasn't interested in entertaining such mundane thoughts, instead gazing out at the immense crowd of fleeing citizens. If he squinted, he could just make out a hazy spot where he was pretty sure the bottleneck was. He couldn't quite tell what had formed it, but it looked like some vehicles had been left parked across the road and paths, funnelling the crowd through a small gap.

The wind was biting this high up, and Jasper rubbed his arms, wishing he'd thought to bring a jumper. All he could do now was wait until the Autobots arrived.

So he waited for a good few hours, cold and thirsty, watching the sun as it finally peaked up above the horizon. As it did, he heard the roar of engines behind him; a second later, two dropships flew overhead. The Autobots had arrived.

One landed in front of the bottleneck, barely fitting lengthways across the street, while the other hovered above. The doors to the one on the ground opened, and three Autobots stepped out and urged the crowd forwards, shepherding them into the dropship's hold until it was full to capacity. The dropship then took off, only to be replaced by the second one. It too was filled, before it flew off in the direction of the rising sun, quickly disappearing from sight.

Jasper now turned his attention to the Autobots, who were transforming, filling up their vehicle modes - which were a bit different than usual, he noted - with yet more desperate people, and driving off (and flying off, in the case of the helicopter Autobot, Drift) after the dropships. One Autobot - Crosshairs, if the green glinting in the early-morning sunlight was any indication - had stayed behind to control the crowd and ease the bottleneck.

For a good two hours Jasper watched as the dropships and Autobots repeatedly returned and left, each time reducing the size of the crowd significantly until by about 8 a.m., it was almost nonexistent, with only a few late stragglers hurrying through the former bottleneck, anxious to get away. Finally, a dropship came flying over in his direction, and hovered just past the edge of the building he'd spent the last few uncomfortable hours on. The roar of the engines assaulted his ears as he inched closer, a door in the side sliding open to reveal Crosshairs, who beckoned him inside. He made a small hop from the building and landed safely in the hold; the door closed behind him, and was promptly knocked off his feet as the dropship accelerated.

Red-faced, Jasper pushed himself back up and quickly found something to hang on to. But he couldn't escape the amused smirk of Crosshairs, who leered down at him.

"So you're the crazy bugger who came up with this giant robot idea?" he cackled. "Well, looks like we'll be seeing whether your idea works or not. We'll have front row seats up here. What's that food you humans are always eating at the cinema? Popcorn? Shoulda brought some of that!"

Jasper was pretty certain that Crosshairs wouldn't like what he thought of that sentiment, so he remained silent and vowed to tell Jolt what his fellow Autobot had said. Crosshairs' sporadic chuckling at his own apparent joke didn't make the trip in the dropship any easier, but thankfully the journey was short, and they stopped after less than a minute.

Just as Jasper was wondering how he was actually going to witness the Jaeger fight the kaiju, the door shimmered briefly before becoming transparent, affording him an excellent view of Vancouver bathing in the early-morning sunlight. Unfortunately, the sight of the kaiju emerging
from Burrard Inlet was a terrible reminder of the reality of the situation. The only saving grace was that he couldn't hear its roar.

"Oof, he's an ugly one," Crosshairs noted gleefully, crouching down next to Jasper "Can't wait to see the Jaeger mess up his face! Eh?" He nudged Jasper with a large, metal finger. "C'mon, you're the brains behind it all! Show a little emotion! Pump your fists and all that?"

Jasper stared determinedly ahead, not daring to even glance at Crosshairs. Why couldn't he have had one of the more mild mannered Autobots with him? Why did it have to be this jerk?

Crosshairs continued to pester Jasper for the next 45 minutes as the kaiju quickly carved a path of destruction through the Vancouver CBD. It was absolute torture for Jasper, seeing the creature Caitlin was about to fight, having the anticipation of knowing that she was getting ever closer to actually fighting it, and the continual ribbing from a self-professed Autobot.

"And there it is!" Crosshairs suddenly announced, tapping the transparent fuselage. "A human-made Great Guardian Robot. Who woulda guessed?"

Jasper followed where he was pointing. There - on the horizon, glimmering in the sunlight, was the Jaeger, suspended between two more of the Autobots' dropships, courtesy of long, thick cables that were bolted onto its shoulder plates. He cringed; he was pretty sure the shoulders hadn't been designed to take that sort of load. The fact that they had - and for the entirety of the trip from Kodiak Island, no less - spoke volumes about either his engineering, the construction abilities of the workers who had assembled it, or both.

The Jaeger was a hundred metres behind the kaiju now, which had stopped its rampage and turned around to assess this new arrival. Then, all of a sudden, the cables detached from the shoulders, and the Jaeger dropped twenty metres to the ground, rocking slightly as it impacted, but managing to keep its balance. Its long, thick power cord stuck up behind it, where a third dropship was hovering, no doubt carrying the power unit.

"Argh, this is too good to see from up here," Crosshairs grumbled. "Teletraan, open this door will ya?"

Jasper barely had time to grab hold of the closest thing he could get his hands on before the door slid open, exposing the interior of the dropship to the howling, biting cold wind. "What are you doing?" he shouted.

"Getting up close and personal," Crosshairs shouted back. "The view up here sucks. I want to be at ground zero." And with that, he leapt from the dropship and fell, the door closing behind him.

Jasper immediately pressed his face against the see-through door, looking down, and saw that Crosshairs had landed safely on a building below, and was preparing to watch the impending fight from his new vantage point. "Idiot," he muttered. He much preferred to be well out of the reach of the kaiju.

But Caitlin wasn't.

And in that instant, Jasper realised that he was utterly powerless to do anything to help Caitlin and Sergio while they fought the kaiju. Their fate rested entirely in the hands of whatever god existed - Human, Cybertronian, he didn't care. All he could do was watch. So he did.

He watched as they slowly moved the Jaeger forward, hesitant, not quite sure what the kaiju would do. But the kaiju didn't do anything either. It simply stopped and stared at them with what almost seemed to be curiosity. This standoff lasted for several long, tense moments until, with a roar, the
kaiju charged forward, its right arm swinging back in preparation for a strike. It closed the distance between them in a matter of seconds, already pulling its arm down for the attack - only for a swift uppercut from the Jaeger to interrupt its charge, snapping its head backwards and almost knocking it off balance.

Caitlin and Sergio quickly pressed their advantage, managing to land several more blows to the kaiju's head before it was finally able to push them away. But its reprieve was only brief, as Caitlin and Sergio pushed right back, and this time the kaiju did indeed fall, tripping over its huge, taloned feet and smashing right into the building behind it. For the brief seconds before the building collapsed on top of the kaiju, Jasper was able to get a glimpse of its face. To his utter surprise, it looked bewildered, as if it had no idea how it had found itself on the ground. That bewilderment turned to alarm as the first debris landed on its head, and a moment later, it was completely obscured from view by the thick cloud of dust rising up into the air.

Jasper blinked. Had they done it? Had they managed to kill the kaiju that quickly, that easily? Surely not!

Caitlin and Sergio appeared to share his scepticism, as the Jaeger made no attempt to approach the destroyed building - for good reason, as it turned out, because the kaiju emerged from the dust cloud moments later with a terrifying roar, its arms once more poised to strike. This time, it was successful.

The left arm struck first, gouging three claw marks in the Jaeger's right shoulder plate. The right arm followed shortly after, burying itself in the hull just below the control pod.

Jasper cursed, the mental image of Caitlin screaming inside her pilot's harness, unable to do anything about the pain coursing through her body until the PONS had been disengaged.

"Come on, Caitlin," he whispered to himself. "Come on!"

The kaiju roared in anger as it unsuccessfully tried to pull itself free of the Jaeger, while at the same time still clawing away at the Jaeger's shoulder plate. Caitlin and Sergio weren't standing idly by, though - in a surprising move, the Jaeger grabbed the kaiju's stuck arm and pushed, stepping forwards while using its weight to force the kaiju back, its heavy footfalls leaving equally massive holes in the ground.

They were moving it out of the city, Jasper realized, pushing it back to the river through the pathway it had already carved through the city's buildings. The kaiju screeched as it stepped back rapidly, almost tripping over itself again, as its other arm came up to slash at the Jaeger's chest - only for the Jaeger to grab it and twist. The kaiju's screeching immediately turned into a shriek of pain as the Jaeger lifted its arms, raising the kaiju high into the air as it began to pick up speed.

Jasper gawped. He'd never imagined that the Jaeger - the prototype Jaeger - would be able to lift a kaiju so easily, and maintain balance, all while starting to move faster than it ever had before - faster than it was meant to be able to move. It was unbelievable. It covered hundreds of meters only a few steps; it was an unstoppable juggernaut, a wall of angered metal, the embodiment of pure fury aimed at the kaiju.

Then it tipped forwards, arms coming down as it slammed the Kaiju into the ground so hard that the earth quaked. Even from his vantage point up in the dropship, Jasper felt the sheer power of it reverberate down below. It was a blow delivered by an angry god. The mere thought of what it would have been like to be the kaiju sent shivers down his spine.
The kaiju had no such luxury; it was stunned, its right arm twisted and broken. The left was barely any better, but as the Jaeger loomed over it, the kaiju mustered some sort of pitiful defiance and swung. By some miracle the claws pierced the Jaeger's armour, and the Jaeger recoiled slightly, but quickly grabbed the arm and *pulled*.

With the squishy, sickening sound of tearing flesh, the arm came free, blue blood spilling from the torn flesh and pooling on the ground. The Jaeger casually tossed the arm to the side, and prepared to strike.

The final blow came only a moment later, as the Jaeger punched down straight at the kaiju's face. The sound of cracking cartilage was matched with the booming of metal colliding with organic plate. It was as if the very concept of contempt had been made into a sound; contempt at the idea that this twisted creature and the others like it had dared to trespass and cause so much death, destruction, panic, heartbreak, and terror.

It was now being told, in no uncertain terms, to fuck off.

The creature twitched, but it was obviously only the final impulses of its nervous system. It took only a few moments for it to still, well and truly dead.

The Jaeger, after a few seconds, straightened up, and Jasper released the biggest, most satisfying breath in his entire life. The Jaeger, the simple prototype, not truly ready for combat, stood tall above its kill, a proud defender. The Jaeger, piloted by a mouse of a girl from Pennsylvania and a farmer's boy from Kentucky, had won.

~8~

News helicopters were in the air within minutes of the kaiju's defeat, all competing to get the best footage they could of the vanquished monster and its metal slayer. The Jaeger program, although public knowledge for some time, had largely remained a secret, so that the public was unaware as to what the precise nature of it was. Now, with the Jaeger on full display for the world to see, the secret was out. Jasper suspected that most people would be utterly amazed at the creation the PPDC had come up with, and the more prideful part of him wanted desperately to be back on Kodiak Island, where the news crews would likely go to try and find the people responsible for the metal giant.

But he was in Vancouver, not Alaska, and considering the amount of damage inflicted on the city, he may as well help with the clean up while he was here.

The AI controlling the dropship, Teletraan, took him down to the waterfront soon after the fight had finished, and as he emerged from the dropship, he realised that he was at the spot where he had enjoyed his coffee only the previous day. What a difference a few hours made.

He looked over in the direction of the Jaeger; the other dropships were already hovering above it, their tow cables dangling like pendulums from their fuselage, as Drift and Crosshairs stood on the shoulderplates, ready to reattach the cables. No doubt the PPDC wanted the Jaeger, and Caitlin and Sergio, back on Kodiak Island as soon as possible, where they would no doubt receive a heroes' welcome.

The prideful side of Jasper twitched once again, but he quashed the feeling and looked around for something to do. The other Autobots who had helped with the evacuation were already climbing over the debris, sorting it into different piles ready for transportation to the appropriate waste disposal facilities. They were a well-oiled machine, having clearly established an effective method that they had honed over their years of disaster recovery. Given the amounts of metal being thrown
around, Jasper decided that he was better off staying put and waiting until HALT arrived, rather than get involved (and likely injured) in the Autobots' efforts.

"Doctor Schoenfeld."

Jasper just about jumped out of his skin as a deep voice spoke up from right behind him. He spun around, and came face-to-shin with Optimus Prime himself. It was honestly quite incredible that despite the Autobot leader's sheer size, he still managed to move so quietly.

"Optimus - Sir -" Jasper paused, putting a hand over his heart and taking a few deep breaths. "I... didn't hear you come up."

Optimus nodded, looking down at him with a moderately curious stare. "Just 'Optimus' is fine, Doctor."

"Jasper," Jasper replied, looking away and sighing. "I...haven't done much doctoring in the past few days." He looked over the city, again. Not too long ago, in perfect condition. Now, a skyline with a line of destroyed buildings going through it.

And yet, despite that...it seemed somehow hopeful. The Autobots were already working hard, and HALT and other human volunteers would be on site in a matter of hours The clean up would be quick.

Optimus' foot was quiet as it took a step next to him, the rocks making a slight noise as he moved. Optimus himself was quiet.

"Your work saved much of this city today," Optimus stated, his voice a soft rumbling calm. "And you still came out here to help. You may not think you have done much, Jasper, but the truth is otherwise."

Jasper sighed. "I've been sitting here trying to get over a bad breakup. I'm only helping out here because I am here."

"Does that make it not noble?"

Jasper opened his mouth to answer, and found he didn't have anything to say. He slowly closed his mouth, considering his words, while Optimus waited, patient. "Less noble," were the words he decided to say.

"If that is what you think." Optimus looked at him. "How has your vacation been, Jasper?"

"Relaxing," Jasper said. Something about Optimus made it easy to open up to him. Was it the calm that he radiated, the hope he inspired? Perhaps something more? "I haven't relaxed in months. But, looking at this city..."

Jasper trailed off, turning towards the damage done. The buildings ruined, the cracked stone and dust, even the small spillage of kaiju blue - so much less than what happened before.

"Some part of me thinks that I shouldn't have stopped working." Jasper said.

Optimus nodded again.

"Pointless thoughts," Jasper continued after a moment. "A few more days would have changed nothing on the Jaeger. Nothing I could have done would have changed what happened today for the better. I might have made it worse, honestly, if I had still been in the position to stop Caitlin
and Sergio from heading out. Who knows how much more damage the kaiju could have done without them..."

Optimus said nothing.

Jasper shook his head, and, after a moment, spoke again. "Jolt said...before I left, that I might want to go find you and have a talk. He said you were always a font of wisdom." Jasper smiled.

"I have noticed a tendency on my part to provide counselling to those who need it," Optimus said quietly.

"Did I do the right thing, Optimus?" Jasper asked, deciding to just get it out of the way. "Just up and leaving like I did? Kaiju are battering at the gates, and I just went ahead and took a vacation. Not that it's lasted long, but I was working on things to stop them, and..." He gestured out to the city. "Here we are."

"I find that many beings underestimate the importance of mental health," Optimus said looking down at him. "Humans and Cybertronians are not so different in this regard. The health of the mind is just as important as the health of the body, or perhaps even more so. To do nothing but work will inevitably break any being; a lack of relaxation, of time to recover, produces its own injuries and builds contempt and anger. To force oneself to work might accomplish that work, but it will hurt."

Optimus paused for a moment, before continuing. "From a purely utilitarian point of view, you took a vacation at a time when your mental health was compromised and your abilities potentially the same, as well as when the Jaeger Program no longer required your immediate presence. Removing yourself from the environment was the right decision, in that light. From the more realistic point of view, you did much the same. I do not believe, Jasper, that you did the wrong thing. Whether or not you did the right thing is up to your own view on the matter, though, personally, I believe you did."

Jasper nodded, slowly. "Thanks, Optimus. Now all I need is to get over the breakup."

"Heartbreak is much more difficult topic," Optimus agreed, "and a more personal matter. There is not much of an option other to examine your own feelings and decide, honestly, your opinions and acceptance of the matter."

Jasper was struck with a sudden question, and before he knew it, his curiosity had got the better of him, and he asked it. "Have you ever been in love, Optimus?"

"Yes."

Jasper was utterly flabbergasted. He hadn't expected such a frank answer.

"Cybertronians, as a product of our lifespans, are not as quick to fall in love as Humans are," Optimus elaborated. "We do, however, have that particular concept in common."

"Cybertronic romance isn't something I've thought about," Jasper said. "Though I'd guess it's complicated."

"The average courtship period could span millennia," Optimus noted. "'Complicated' is, perhaps, an understatement."

Jasper smiled, then frowned as another thought came to him. "Oh, by the way, why are you here? I know you like to show up at disaster zones to help out, but I would have thought you'd be busy
with the PPDC higher ups after the attack today."

"For the moment, I am taking a short leave," Optimus said. "A new arrival will be here soon."

"Another Autobot?" Jasper asked, interested. "I haven't heard anything about that."

Optimus looked at him, surprised. "The news broke a few days ago. There was quite the stir among the aerospace community."

Jasper paused. "I... haven't been keeping up with the news. The things you miss..."

Optimus nodded again. "It has been pleasant talking to you, but unfortunately, I do need to go now, Jasper."

Jasper smiled. "Don't let me keep you. And... thank you, Optimus. Again."

"You are welcome."

As Optimus began to walk away, Jasper couldn't help but feel reinvigorated. Jolt had been right. He had needed time off. Talking to Optimus really had helped. Now, he was ready to head back to the island. Now, he was ready to celebrate with Caitlin, rejoicing with her as she celebrated her defeat of the kaiju.

~8~

He was almost there, and as he passed his destination's moon he finally allowed himself to feel excited. It had been so long since he'd seen Optimus, not to mention the others that were bound to be with him. How had they fared on this strange, alien world? What were the large creatures attacking the native population? They were questions that he would soon have answers for.

The remaining distance to Earth passed quickly; compared to interstellar space, it was but a brief blip. The cold of the vacuum of space was replaced by the glorious warmth that atmospheric friction brought as the horizon around him changed from the pitiless black of the void to the familiar light blue that was present on most worlds that supported organic life. He deployed his shields, spinning a configuration of cybermatter sheets out in order to slow down. Fire quickly erupted, the air compressing in front of him.

It was tolerable. He'd done it a thousand, a million, times before. Doubtless, he would do it again.

Kilometers vanished quickly, eaten up, but he was slowing down. He shifted his form around a bit more, folding his plates back into himself, settling for a more aerodynamic configuration. Thrusters engaged, and he corrected his course, starting a spin in order to bleed off a bit more kinetic energy.

And, perhaps, to give a show. The vapor lines that trailed behind him marked a spiral down.

At the last second, he spun, shifting out of his aerodynamic shape in order to assume his full form. A variety of thrusters around his body activated, and he hit the ground with far more care and delicacy than most would expect from something of his size.

Slowly, he stood up, rising to his full height, and he gazed forwards, taking in his surroundings.

The Autobots were the first people he saw, and as expected, they looked a bit different from when he'd last seen them. The sleek, streamlined bodies that he remembered had been replaced by jagged plating that barely covered the protoform beneath – sure signs of strict energon rationing. But they were nonetheless recognisable as the friends he'd fought with through ages past.
His optics scanned over the crowd – the good medic, Ratchet; the Decepticon-turned-Autobot, Deadlock; and Sideswipe, looking very lonely without Sunstreaker by his side. Arcee, Elita-One and Chromia were there as well, still as deformed as the day they had been rescued from Shockwave's laboratory. To his surprise, even the self-pronounced loner, Crosshairs, was present.

Finally, he turned to Optimus Prime. The tallest of them all, he stood at the head of the group, the sunlight glinting off his blue and red body. Looking up at him, the Autobot leader stepped forward, smiling. Lips. An odd choice, from him. He was so used to the faceplate.

"Greetings, Superion," he said. "It is my pleasure and my privilege to welcome you to Earth."

"Optimus Prime," Superion said, returning the smile. "It is good to be with you once more."

~8~

The hospital was quiet, with nothing but the perpetual beeping of equipment disturbing the sterilised silence. It was mind-numbingly boring, laying back on the bed, tubes plugged into her body, casts surrounding her limbs.

Kaori supposed that she should be thankful that she was even alive at all – and she was, make no mistake about it. But she wished her encounter with the kaiju had been one she could have walked away from. She knew she'd never forget the sensation of impact as her sub hit the PPDC one that had hailed them, or the fuzzy relief as she, Mihoko, and the two PPDC officers had been pulled from the wreckage by the Autobots. They'd been immediately airlifted to a Guamanian hospital, but Mihoko had died on the journey.

Despite barely knowing the girl, Kaori found herself crying herself to sleep most nights, wishing that the submarine pilot was still here, so that she could have the comfort of going through the pain of recovery with someone who had experienced the same ordeal as her. But that was not the case, and she would have to endure the recovery on her own.

Voices echoed down the corridor, interrupting her reverie, and she looked interestedly at the doorway, hoping that someone would be coming to see her.

Her hope was well-founded, as in walked her boss, Shao Liwei, accompanied by two of his security personnel. Liwei observed her for a few moments, his dark eyes running over the casts covering her right arm and leg. Then he nodded at his two lackeys, and they left the room, though Kaori guessed that they had taken up positions outside the doorway.

"I got your transmission of the data," Liwei said quietly in fluent Japanese.

"You did?" Kaori could hardly believe it. The mission had been a success!

"I did," Liwei confirmed. "You have done very well, Miss Koyamada, very well indeed."

"Thank you sir." Rays of happiness penetrated Kaori's mind for the first time in days. Could this mean she was getting rewarded – perhaps with a promotion, or a pay rise? She listened with bated breath as Liwei continued.

"Your efforts have provided a great service for Shao Industries," he said. "With the information you gathered, we will be able to make several new industry advances over our competitors. You will, of course, receive a generous promotion package. It is the least we can do to compensate you for the terrible ordeal you experienced."

Yes!
Liwei sat down on the side of her bed. "You have proven yourself to be a very valuable employee of Shao Industries, Miss Koyamada. Can I count on your continued loyalty?"

"Most certainly, sir."

"Excellent!" Liwei beamed. "The doctors say you should be discharged within the week. Once you have your casts removed, I am pleased to say that I have another assignment for you."

He reached into his breast pocket, took out a piece of folded paper, and handed it to Kaori.

Brow furrowed in confusion, Kaori unfolded the paper and stared down at the writing on it. The PPDC logo was emblazoned at the top, and underneath, in bold Japanese characters, was written:

JAEGER PILOTS WANTED

She looked up at Liwei in shock.

"I'm sure you'll make an excellent Jaeger pilot, Miss Koyamada," Liwei said smoothly, before standing up, patting her arm, and walking out of the room, leaving Kaori to wonder once again just what she had got herself into.

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