In Media Bellum

by Authorticity

Summary

As you understand it, Earth is the first peace they've had in a long while. That's something you're willing to fight for.
(Updates on Sundays)

Notes

Parallax: the angle between the apparent position of the same star, viewed six months apart. Used to calculate the distance to distant celestial bodies in light years.
Parallax

You didn't move to Jasper, Nevada for the virtues of Jasper, Nevada. If you had, you probably would've been gone within a year, because there wasn't a lot of them. Although there wasn't a lot of Jasper, geographically speaking. Maybe it was proportional.

The town itself was see-through—stand by the city limit, look down the main road at the other. Everyone knew everyone else, at least coincidentally. When there were only six residential roads within a twenty-mile radius and one school, apparently you got a little cozy.

Your arrival had been the event of the month. You almost felt guilty at how genuine and law-abiding you turned out to be—you were pretty sure Mrs. Nguyen two doors over was hoping you'd turned out to be someone's long-lost daughter or something. In a way, you couldn't blame her. There was a school, a gas station, two burger joints in a half-hearted turf war, and a farmhouse converted into a library. It was pretty sparse.

But you didn't move to Jasper for the ambiance. You moved to Jasper for the sky.

Telecommuting meant that not only could you live literally wherever you wanted, but that your office was less than fifty feet from the rest of your life. Some days, this was a bad thing, since you were basically on-call whenever you were at home. Other days, though, it meant that you could scoop up your telescope on your way out the door, slap a sandwich together, and be outside of Jasper less than ten minutes after you clocked out.

Say what you would of Jasper's scant numbers, eclectic infrastructure, and diminutive yet disturbingly intense fast-food climate, but it gave off all the light pollution of a dying nightlight. You could park your pickup truck by the side of the road and set your telescope up right there in the bed. There was a planisphere with Jasper's general latitude in the glovebox, but you hardly needed it. As the sky darkened and the stars slowly turned overhead, you could name every one.

September turned out to be a great month for stargazing in the desert. The nights were slowly getting colder and colder, but they didn't have the counter-intuitive desert chill that had caught you unawares your first winter outside of New England. You had the winter coat you had almost foolishly given away wrapped loosely over your shoulders, and a mug of chicken broth resting by your feet as you leaned against the cab of the truck. You let your head tilt up, enjoying the vertigo as the horizon disappeared from the edge of your vision and your head swam with stars.

A good night.

Your reverie was disturbed by a muffled pop-crackle in the distance. Some kids playing with fireworks, maybe. Were private fireworks legal in Nevada?

A sound you recognized from city living in colder climes—the skid of metal on asphalt. Reluctantly, you looked down and around, squinting into the darkness. This far out, if there had been a car crash, there was a very real chance no one would know about it until morning. You grabbed your canteen and started putting the telescope away. The stars would be there tomorrow night.

A long, shrill skreeeeel of metal was your only warning before a full-size big-rig tractor came bouncing end over end down the road. It screeched to a halt beside your truck with a dramatic spattering of sparks. Before you could do more than register that whatever had the strength to throw a tractor-trailer was most likely coming this way, the cab cracked in two—and kept splitting, pieces re-folding and twisting around each other like one of those paper magic tricks.
You stumbled away from the road, heart in your throat. You registered distantly that it probably wasn't safe to sprint through the desert at night, with predators and snakes and things. Most of your brain, though, was preoccupied with primal, blinding panic and the odd clarity of mortal terror. You skidded to a halt behind a rock, doubling over. Once you had your breath, you leaned out of hiding, craning your neck for a look.

You had wound up some few hundred yards away from the road. You had a surprisingly choice view, then, of the big rig, as it finished re-folding itself into the shape of a towering figure, easily as large as a house. It braced itself, blades unfolding from its hands--just as an equally large figure lunged at it out of the darkness. Metal rang against metal, and your panic-soaked brain registered that you were watching Jasper's very own Pacific Rim: Uprising live re-enactment.

You ducked back down. Your breathing was picking up, threatening to cross the line from adrenaline-fueled to hyperventilation. You breathed into your sleeve, trying to get it under control. Panicking wasn't a luxury you could afford right now.

You didn't like your chances trying to escape undetected in the open ground around you, so you stayed put. The low light didn't do you any favors, but you didn't need a telescope to see they were just whaling on each other. Every hit they landed sent the other skidding back a good yard or so. Every step they took sent tremors through the ground. For all their size, though—you can't help but admire their grace, their speed. It was like a terrifying ballet.

Terrifying, deadly ballet. The attacker tore a piece off the big-rig with a sickening squeal of tearing metal. You heard a low rumble of pain, as the big-rig stumbled to one knee. In retaliation, they tensed and sprang, knocking the crown of their head directly into their attacker's chin. They both went down with a ground-shaking crash.

Holy shit.

The epic battle taking place behind you raged on long enough that your adrenaline began to fade. Instead, primal anxiety kept you in place. You alternated between checking to make sure—really sure—that you hadn't just imagined it, and stray thoughts like wow, they're really going at it, aren't they and I wonder if my truck's been stepped on yet or goddammit, I dropped my broth.

Looking back on it, you would realize you were pretty deep in shock. At the time, though, you were just sort of sad about the broth.

Eventually, they disengaged with a series of unintelligible rumbles, and the aggressor—taller and spikier and just plain nastier looking than the other one—sprang into the air. Their silhouette reconstrued itself into some sort of aircraft—as weirdly sinister as their humanoid shape had been—and tore off into the sky.

The remaining figure watched it leave for a long, tense moment. They dropped to their knees. They knelt, arms braced on the ground, strangely small under the wide Nevada sky. It was strangely tempting to go over and check on it—insane, of course. The twenty-foot-tall behemoth had just proven fully capable of taking care of themselves. You kept your eyes trained on them as they pushed themselves to their feet, standing at their full height...and paused, facing you. You froze.

Your heart skipped a beat when you finally register that they hadn't spotted you...but they had spotted your truck. Your well-cared-for, obviously not-abandoned truck. Shit. You jerked back behind your rock, heart thumping in your ears. You listened to your own muted breath for five seconds, ten. Fifteen.
With an odd mechanical chugging sound, you heard their engine roar back to life. You stared as it drove away, leaving you crouching awkwardly behind a rock, surrounded by empty desert and luminous sky.

You walked back to where your truck still stood, miraculously unharmed. You attempted to scrape the flattened remains of your canteen off the asphalt, without success. You zipped the telescope into its bag and tossed it in the back.

Then you got into the car, took a deep breath, and burst into tears.

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Once you calmed down enough to drive home, you considered your options. The first—and most likely only—option readily available to you was, well, nothing. Other than your truck—which could have been unattended—you appeared to have escaped without detection. Unless you wound up taken away by men in dark suits or something, as loathe as you were to admit it, it seemed as though it might just be in the cards for you to ignore that night entirely. Go stargazing in a different spot, buy a new canteen, and you were free to pretend everything was as it should be.

But—and here was the thing—you didn't want to.

Once you got past the mortal terror and heart-rending uncertainty, you realized, sipping your tea automatically, there was a little part of you—the spastic, unkempt, five-year-old version of yourself—that thought this was the coolest thing that had ever happened to you. You lived in a world that contained real-life, full-size, genuine giant robots.

The half-delirious joy came, ruled your worldview for a couple of weeks, and slowly faded. You logged onto work. You paid your bills. You helped the two youngest Esquivel kids set up a telescope in their yard, and taught them how to find Mars. Life, despite its best efforts, went on, and so did you. Except that, now that you were paying attention?

Weird stuff was everywhere.

You kept finding big swatches of leveled ground out in the desert like it had been stamped flat by enormous feet. You kept an eye on traffic whenever you drove. For the most part, all the other cars behaved themselves—except for a weirdly pristine, deep red pickup truck that bounced on its tires to avoid driving over a squirrel. You googled cars robots Jasper only once. It brought up a bunch of hits of the same ten or fifteen cat videos.

Slowly, you accepted that, except for the one really awful evening, whatever cryptids Jasper, Nevada was hiding were content to leave you alone.

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You had a standing agreement with your distant neighbors, the Darbys, on the subject of household chores. June Darby was the first person to get over her apparent shock at seeing a new face in Jasper, and such, she held a special place in your heart.

She was also the fully qualified doctor who you once watched nearly kill herself trying to open an envelope, put together a cooked lunch, and talk to you all at the same time. The woman was perpetually swamped; and her son, Jack, had enough extracurriculars that he was out of the house nearly as much as she was. You, with your telecommuting job and complete lack of conventional social life, had all the time to spare to help them rake the leaves out of their backyard. So you did.

June, interpreting this as an act of neighborly war, immediately retaliated by weeding and watering
your garden and sending Jack over with cookies shaped like maple leaves.

(The Darbys were your favorite neighbors.)

So you had this rhythm, this back and forth of looking after each other's outdoor space. That week, June had escalated the conflict, leaving a tasteful pot of asters with detailed care instructions by your door. You were planning your next move—would mowing their yarn be too much?—when you heard muffled voices from their closed garage, loud enough for you to hear. You would have left it alone—except that June was supposed to be at the clinic two towns over, and Jack was at his science fiction club. Suspicious.

You hesitated by the side door of the garage. Through the gritty window, you could just make out Jack pacing, gesturing in short, irritated motions with his hands. He appeared to be alone. You rapped lightly on the glass.

Jack jumped about a foot in the air, whirling around and nearly knocking a motorcycle helmet off the worktable. You stood back as he opened the door. "Hey! Uh, hey. How's it going?"

"Hey, Jack." You shifted to see behind him. The garage was as empty as it had seemed. "Being nosy, I guess. I heard shouting, and I know your mom's out of town today. Everything good?"

"Yeah, uh, just." Jack shrugged, looking everywhere but at you. "Theater club. Well, it's theater, for a club. For science fiction club. Just...practicing my lines."

You had the sneaking suspicion you were being lied to. Lied to very, very poorly, at that.

But at the end of the day, it was none of your business. You knew the crowd Jack ran with—Raf, the Esquivel family's youngest, and Miko the exchange student. Both of whom were good kids. Besides, Jack had a depressingly good head on his shoulders. You probably got into more trouble as a teen than he did, and that was saying something. "Sure. Well, see you around, dude."

"Yeah," he told you, poorly disguising his relief. "Sure, see you."

As he closed the door, though, your eye caught something it hadn't before. "Whoa." You crane your head over Jack's shoulder. "Nice motorcycle, dude. Is that your mom's?"

His shoulders went up. "No! I mean, it's mine. Yeah. K.O. Burgers gave us a bonus for de-egging the windows, and I thought, you know, why not, right?" He laughed, nervously.

"Sure." You had seen the state of the local burger joint after it got egged, and frankly, if Jack and his coworkers had been paid proportionally, it wasn't too much of a stretch. It was doubtful that Mr. Callighan could have paid them nearly that much without going bankrupt, as much as he hated the diner across town.

Still, you nodded along. You were making the kid uncomfortable; whatever he had going on that he didn't want you seeing, you didn't need to push it. Jack was a good kid; he didn't need you babysitting him. Let it go. Let him talk about the bike, there isn't a biker born who didn't love talking about their ride. "My dad used to drive long haul sometimes for the company that made those, you know, why not, right?" He laughed, nervously.

"Sure." You had seen the state of the local burger joint after it got egged, and frankly, if Jack and his coworkers had been paid proportionally, it wasn't too much of a stretch. It was doubtful that Mr. Callighan could have paid them nearly that much without going bankrupt, as much as he hated the diner across town.

"Uh-huh." Jack was visibly sweating. "Something like that. So, hey, I'm just gonna get back to rehearsal. See you—oh, Mom wanted me to tell you thanks for fixing the mailbox."

"No problem." You stepped backward. "Break a leg."
The door slammed shut.

Jack was sixteen, you told yourself. He didn't need you worrying about him. *What's the worst that could happen?*

You took a moment to imagine all the ways someone that age could get into trouble. Then you thought of the ways a teenager could get into trouble in Jasper, Nevada, and felt a little better.

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"Raf!" you called across the street, shifting your groceries to wave. Three days later, September was in full autumnal swing—as much as Nevada seemed to have an autumnal swing. You were wearing a thin sweater out of spite more than anything. "How's the telescope working?"

The kid jumped about a foot in the air. "Oh! It's doing awesome, thank you again. Did you, uh, catch that meteor shower?"

"Nah. It as overcast." You shoot him a weird glance. It was raining, the night of the meteor shower. There was no way he couldn't have noticed, especially out in the desert this time of year.

"Huh." He gives you a weird kind of shrug; *what can you do? *"I...guess I didn't miss much, then." He grabbed his backpack from the ground and tucked his phone away, already starting down the sidewalk. "Sorry, late for sci-fi club. See you around!"

He took off down the sidewalk at a good clip.

Weird.

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"Hey!"

You glanced up. Miko Nakadai, noted delinquent and fellow Jasper newcomer, was sprinting full-tilt down the sidewalk, waving madly. "If Mrs. Johnson comes by, I wasn't here!"

She sprinted about thirty feet down the sidewalk, turned, and dove into a vaguely familiar-looking green truck. It peeled away from the curb like they were on the lam.

Some fifteen seconds later, the History teacher, Mrs. Johnson, came belting around the corner in her patent leather pumps. "Did you—ugh—" She stumbled to a halt, hands on her knees. "Has Miko been by?"

"Uh," you said.

She groaned. "Must've...must've gone by her." She turned to go. "If you see her, let her know she's to report—to report... oh, never mind!"

With a shake of her head, the English teacher took off in the direction she had come, still breathing heavily.

You continued raking leaves. For Miko, that was pretty typical.
Asterism

Chapter Summary

Asterisms are patterns of stars independent of constellations, used to navigate the night sky by eye. Notable asterisms include the Big Dipper, found inside Ursa Major; The Summer Triangle, connecting Altair, Deneb; and Vega, and Orion’s Belt. Asterisms are particularly useful for novices, as a way of recognizing constellations based on their relative positions.

Chapter Notes

Some housekeeping notes: Firstly, since it didn't occur to me to put this in the first chapter anywhere, updates will be on Sundays. Hopefully. Chapters will be pretty short until I get the hang of this backlog thing, although when that will happen, none can say. Secondly, as per the tags, this story will follow canon if and when I deem it necessary. The events of Transformers Prime has already been told; while obviously I'm borrowing heavily (it's still fanfic, after all), I have my own story to tell. Some events will be modified to be more interesting in a text format, some to be less Treasure Hunt of Doom; and others will be ignored entirely.
A note on the astronomy in this fic: while I know enough to get by, the way I practice astronomy is fairly informal--more neck cramps and notebooks than observatories and spectrographs. If you see anything I have blatantly, horribly wrong, please let me know. Additionally I'm much farther north than Nevada is, meaning that their stellar map is way different than mine is. The underlying principles are the same, though.
And finally, a big fat thank you to everyone who left kudos and comments! It was as wonderful as it was shocking to see people liking this enough to leave feedback. I won't pretend to know what I'm doing, but it's immensely heartening to see people enjoying it. I'm really looking forward to continuing this, and I hope it'll turn out well.
Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the first Saturday of October, you woke up early, packed a meal, and drove straight out of town. Back home, it would have been leaf-peeping season; but you weren't as cussed about it as you had anticipated. Autumn suited Nevada surprisingly well, given the lack of trees. The early morning light turned everything faintly rosy, and the orange rock was almost festive. You cranked David Bowie on the radio, rolled down all the windows, and stepped on it. It wasn't an old-fashioned foliage drive, but it wasn't bad.

Yeah, you thought, with a vague pang for the thick canopies of your home state. This'll do nicely.

You jammed along down the road for a good hour or so before you found a rest stop. You greeted the kiosk lady as you came out of the bathroom, snagging a bag of something crunchy and full of fructose from the rack.
As you paid, you spied a brightly colored sports car out the window. Car watching had drifted from a paranoid obsession to a hobby, but you knew enough to recognize a sweet car when you saw it.

"That yours?" asked the kiosk cashier, popping her gum.

"If only." You glanced around for its owner. The foyer was deserted, other than the two of you. Maybe they were in the bathroom.

... You drove another three hours before your leg started cramping. There wasn't much around, except the distant mesas and some scrub brush, so you pulled over by the side of the road to eat your sandwich.

A familiar scene, you realized. You defiantly sipped your water bottle, determined not to glance around for hazy figures on the horizon. You were going to enjoy today. No paranoia, no checking for other cars, no nothing. You were de-stressing.

You stared at the horizon for a long moment, quietly stressing.

Dammit. You drained the bottle and crushed the plastic, tossing it into the back seat of your car. You'd recycle it when you got home.

A cloud of dust rose in the distance, drawing nearer at an alarming rate. You squinted at it, like an idiot.

It slowly resolved itself into the cherry-red Aston Martin from the rest stop and a bright yellow Camaro-looking car you were dead certain you'd seen around Jasper. Both heading directly toward you — and, with an ear-splitting reverberation, another goddamn giant robot vaulted over your truck, hurling itself at the Aston Martin like a cannonball.

The Aston Martin twirled itself into a humanoid figure and braced, just as they collided. They went down with an almighty crash, sending dust everywhere.

A clear, deep voice howled from somewhere in the tangle. "My finish!"

The dark green one heaved themselves back to their feet and stumbled backward, raising an arm to put some space between them and the snarling, spitting sports car, doing their level best to gouge out their eyes. They took one huge step back under the onslaught, then another. Another.

It occurred to you that you should probably be moving.

You dove for cover, just as Dark Green went reeling back, losing their balance altogether. They landed fanny-first on your truck, with a decisive crunch.

Typical, you thought, over the drum of terror in your ears and the squeal of the car alarm. And no convenient boulders to hide behind, either.

The Camaro transformed and tackled Red from behind, bringing them to the ground again with an angry squawk. They rolled away, locked in a vicious-looking judo hold.

Dark Green caught their breath, leaning heavily on the remains of your truck. They were distinctly ovoid, now that you had a good look; a lumpy, jaw-heavy head resting on an armored bowling ball of a body. They shook their head, joints scraping with sand. You watched, frozen, as they noticed
the wreckage of your truck peeking out from under their torso.

"What the…? Crud." They glanced around, eyes landing on you with a rapid re-focus. You weren't sure who was more dismayed, them or you. "Slag, not again."

"Yeah, you're telling me," you said, voice wobbling.

A mechanical screech grabbed both of your attention. Red had produced a wicked-looking cattle prod from somewhere, twirling it artfully in one hand as he stalked back over. Behind him, Yellow tried to climb to their feet and fell, sparking heavily.

"Now, now," said Red, with a nasty grin. "Where were we?"

"Get to safety," Dark Green muttered at you.

You glance at the miles of scrub brush and flat ground around you. "Uh?"

"Just go!" He lunged at Red. With a graceful jab of the electric prod, he fell back just as quickly, cursing. Red laughed, twirling it like a cane.

"Honestly! You two are so off your game today. Is something wrong?" He simpered, dead white face twisting into a pout. "Something happening at home, maybe?"

You realized, with mortal clarity, that the moment he stopped gloating, his gaze would fall on you next. There was nowhere to hide. The was no way to run. Sooner or later, you were going to die.

Well. You didn't have much to lose, then.

With dream-like calm, heart beating in your ears, you reached through the shattered window of your truck and leaned your full weight on the horn.

It was a lot louder outside the vehicle. You let up as soon as glowing red eyes snapped in your direction.

Why did I do that? You wondered, stumbling over your own feet as you backed away. That was an outside chance at best. I could have done so many other things instead.

Holy shit, replied a wise voice from deep within you Holy shit. Holy shit. Big fucking robot.

“Well, well,” he (???) purred, in a surprisingly smooth voice, advancing frighteningly quickly for such a large being. “You little pests just keep popping up everywhere, don't you?”

“Oh,” you said, mesmerized with terror.

He leaned down, reaching for you…

...And went sprawling, as Dark Green grabbed the collar of his armor and yanked. As soon as he landed, Yellow was on him, gaining ground as he forced him away from you. Dark Green stepped in between you and them, using his bulk as a barrier.

The red and white robot visibly weighed his chances, and, with an oddly carefree shrug, twisted himself back into a muscle car and took off. Yellow dove onto the road after him, engine gunning.

You sat heavily in the dirt. Your truck creaked beside you, damaged metal supports whining under their weight. You wondered vaguely if you were going to cry again.
“Uh.” The dark green robot was back, staring down at you like he was wondering if you bit or not.
“You, uh. You okay?”

You shot him a thumb's up, hand trembling.


You stared.

He fidgeted. The remains of your truck groaned in the background as something in the interior buckled and ignited.

You nodded.

... 

It was a tense ride back to Jasper. You kept your hands in your lap, unsure of the etiquette for riding inside someone. You felt like a baby kangaroo.

You listened to the sound of the engine, eyes closed. Your head was pounding.


You considered. “Some of the old stuff.” You paused. “I don't want to listen to rock music, if you're asking.”

“Right!” said the truck. “Right. No radio, then.”

“So,” you said, after another few moments of intense awkwardness. “You're a giant robot.”

“Yeah,” He said, resignedly. “And you, uh, saw everything.”

“Yup.”

“Any chance I could convince you were dreaming?”

“My car insurance doesn't cover parasomnia, so no.”

“Right.” He said again. “Sorry.”

You drove in silence.

“Are you actually taking me home?”

“Sure, that's your home address, right?” The robot asked, confused. He paused “Wait, no, I got it, yeah. Nah, no alien abductions or whatever. I'm taking you straight home. No funny business.”


“Uhh.” He sounded spooked. “Yeah?”

You explain that you were pretty sure you saw him help her ditch detention a couple of weeks ago. He snorted, sounding a little more at ease. “Aw, was that what was going on? Yeah, that was us. Slag, I'm gonna have northern patrols for a month after this.”

“You in trouble?”
“Not supposed to blow our cover. Not everyone's as casual about aliens as you are.”

“It's the shock.” You explained conversationally.

“Gotcha.”

“So, I'm guessing there's more of you? I'm pretty sure I've spotted at least, like, five.”

“You weren't supposed to spot any of us.” He sounded uncomfortable again. “We're keeping a low profile.”

“Right.” It wasn't that low a profile, if they asked you, but you figured there was only so much you could do with twenty-foot tall behemoths. “So, why am I not in custody?”

“What, you're gonna run to the six o'clock news?” He sounded amused. You wished you had some facial cues to work off of.

“Fair,” you admitted.

There was another long pause, but a less tense one. You introduced yourself.

“Name's Bulkhead.” He responded, after a beat. “Although whether or not you're gonna have the chance to wear it out ain't up to me. Until you get the okay from the boss, the less you think about us, the better.”

You found it a little suspect that you're being shut out for secrecy's sake, but the likes of Miko Nakadai, delinquent at large, had a green light. You kept that thought to yourself. “Sure. What's the next step, then?”

“You go home, do nothing to draw attention to yourself, and wait for us to get in touch. Comms are down, or we'd be heading back to base from here--”

“I thought alien abductions were passe?”

“...Yeah, sure, squishy.” He sounded amused. “But I'm basically dropping you off and running home to let my superior officer know you're coming, then coming back and getting you. Secrecy, and all.”

You mulled this over. “Do you have a spaceship?”

“Heh. Yeah, but it blew up.”

“...Ouch.”

... True to his word, Bulkhead dropped you off at home before heading west. You barely had enough time to eat some toast, have a minor breakdown in the shower, and get dressed before you heard a gentle knock at the door.

Rafael Esquivel was on the other side, peering up at you through his glasses like a tiny owl. “Raf?”

“Hey.” He gestured behind him at a familiar yellow Camaro. “We're your ride!”

The cheer in his voice was forced at best, but you shot him a grin anyway, shouldering your backpack. You didn't expect to be gone overnight, but with the morning you had, you wanted to be prepared for anything.
The passenger door popped open with a cheerful whirr. You let Raf slide in first before folding yourself up to fit in the back. Muscle car backseats were built for Hobbits, whether they were earth-made or not. “I'm translating,” Raf explained. “Bumblebee can't speak English.”

You took that as it was. You knew better than to press on stuff like this. “Nice to meet you, Bumblebee.”

The dashboard beeped and whirred cheerfully at you as he pulled out of your driveway. “You too, he says.” Raf translated. “He says he's sorry your truck got squished.”

“Better it than someone.” You loved that truck, but all in all, you hadn't given the loss of it much thought in the face of, well. Absolutely everything else.

Bumblebee chittered, apparently in agreement, and launched into a paragraph of polysyllabic whistles and beeps. Raf translated dutifully. “We're taking you to a debriefing. If everything goes well, there'll be someone you can talk to about covering the damages later.”

“Is that...all he said?” That was a lot of R2D2 talk for just that.

Raf glanced at the dashboard. “There are a lot of qualifiers in Cyb...in Bee's language when you're talking to important outsiders. He says he likes your sweater, though.”

You glanced down. You weren't wearing anything out of the ordinary. “Thank you?”

The ride wound up being cheerful, if short. You had the distinct impression Raf and Bee were making an effort to distract you, but they were both so earnest about it that you didn't have the heart to call them out on it.

They were obviously close. It was good to see Raf, the shy little kid from the next block over, so open and happy. He needed more friends.

Bumblebee drove out of town, heading west. It was getting towards late afternoon, and the sun peeked in between the gap between two mesas. The visors flicked themselves down to keep the sun out of your and Raf's eyes.

Eventually, you came to a crossway by the side of the mesa. “This part can be a little scary at first,” Raf told you confidentially. Bee twittered, amused, as he ignored the crossways and kept a steady course for the mesa, tired jostling over loose rocks and dirt.

Raf's warning helped. Still, you felt your breath catch in your throat as the hidden cargo door slid open. The interior ramp reminded you of old Cold War buildings—that strange mix of bare necessity and antiquity, lit with pale fluorescents hanging from the high ceiling.

Bumblebee parked just outside the ramp, at the edge of a huge room. You followed Raf as he got out and backed away, giving the robot room to transform. Bee beeped at you encouragingly, stepping carefully around the two of you, leery of sudden movements from his easily squishable companions. You barely noticed, gazed fixed on the room. It all seemed a little realer, somehow, more visceral.

There were alien robots in Nevada. Fuck.

“He's gonna tell the others we're here.” Raf slung his backpack higher on his shoulder, gesturing towards a catwalk area furnished with a couch and TV. “We can have a seat if you want.”

You followed him wordlessly. The scale of the room was...staggering. Bee had moved around in the space as casually as though it was his living room, but even for him, the ceiling soared overhead. It
made you wonder just how large these robots got, exactly.

You plunked your butt down on one end of the ugly, well-worn couch. You vaguely recognized it as the one that had been sitting at the end of the Esquivel's driveway a few weeks ago.

“So,” you said, at length. “‘Science fiction club?’”


“I'm gonna take a wild guess and say all this,” you waved at the room at large, “isn't school-mandated. Unless the robotics club has way better funding than I thought.”

He chuckled awkwardly. “Yeah, I guess. It's not like it's illegal, though. Like, the government knows we're here. Just not our parents.”

That was a worrisome prospect. You didn't relish the thought of lying to the likes of June. Mrs. Esquivel, on the other hand, was at least doable—you'd be surprised if she even noticed. Raf mixed in with the wallpaper a little too much at home. Miko's foster family, you assumed, wouldn't even blink an eye. They were a little too blasé about Miko's shenanigans, in your opinion.

“And they're not called robots,” Raf added after a moment. “They call themselves--”

“Autobots,” said a deep, sonorous voice. “Autonomous, robotic organisms.”

Raf slid off the sofa to stand at the railing. You followed suit, whirling around.

Striding towards you, easily as tall as a three-story house, was the big-rig robot you spotted from a distance in September. If you thought he was intimidating then, he was downright regal now. He stared through you, with the same focus-lens eyes Bulkhead and Bumblebee had. You felt the suffocating weight of the full attention of a being much, much older than you, and suppressed a nervous shiver, resisting the urge to put more space between the two of you.

Raf murmured, “Optimus Prime. He's the leader.”

The Autobot inclined his head in acknowledgment, eyes fastened first on Raf, then on you.

You waved lamely, as Raf introduced you. “Sorry for the trouble.”

He nodded gravely at you. “I regret your life was put needlessly in peril. And that you have suffered loss of property for it.”

“It...” You squirmed. You had the uncomfortable feeling of a small child underfoot, as though you were being paid more attention than you were owed. You were the size of this person's finger. What were you even doing, trying to hold up a conversation? “It was just a truck. Like, you guys have always been pretty discreet before, it's no big deal.”

“Before?” Those unsettling eyes blinked at you. He glanced over his shoulder. Bulkhead had appeared in the doorway behind him, looking sheepish.

“They put together some puzzle pieces, boss.”

“And, um.” You gave a rough outline of your harrowing stargazing trip. “That was you, right? And—oh my god, I'm so slow, Jack's motorcycle.” You ran your hand through your hair. “Oh my god, it's so obvious.”

“All questions are easily answered,” Optimus Prime said bemusedly. “If you are in possession of the
solution. We have gone to great lengths to ensure our presence went unnoticed by the general population of this planet.” His eyes flicked to Raf. “With notable exceptions.”

“If you're going to try to scare me into silence,” you told him wryly, “Don't bother. I'd get laughed out of Jasper. At best.”

He straightened the tiniest fraction—which was still pretty notable on a person that tall. “Fear is not the Autobot way.”

You look up at all thirty feet of him. “With all due respect, sir, it doesn't have to be. I'm not sure how much you could help it.”

He studied you for a moment longer, before continuing. “Nevertheless. We have summoned you here not only to ask for your silence, but for your aid.”

Given that the number of tasks a comp tech/astronomy hobbyist could help giant alien robots with that Raf or Jack could not was pretty slim, you assumed that translated to: they wanted you on their payroll, to make super-duper certain you weren't a liability. Understandable, you supposed. You wouldn't want some random stranger holding that kind of hold over you loose in the world, either. You leaned on the railing. “I'm...listening, but I'd rather have a little more information before I agree to anything.”

“Prudent.” Optimus gestured for you to take a seat.

He was interrupted as a set of consoles hummed to life, sending green-tinted screens flickering uneasily over the walls. Bumblebee whooped celebratorily.

“That ought to do it!” said a muffled voice from down the hall. “It's about time, too, blasted Earth tech—what in Primus' name!?” The red and white Autobot that had appeared in the doorway yelped, skittering back as though you might attack. “Unmaker take it, not another one!” he snapped. “Arcee!”

“Not it!” someone yelled from farther down the hall.

“Ratchet,” said Optimus, quellingly.

Ratchet glared at him, and then even more bitterly at you. “This is the fourth in less than a joor! At this rate, we might as well hold a public press conference.”

“There was an incident during the communications blackout,” Optimus said calmly. “It was, as before, unavoidable. However, if you are busy, introductions can be made later.”

They shared a brief, silent conversation over your head. You watched warily, ill at ease with someone so large and so obviously displeased at your presence here.

Finally, Ratchet turned back to you. “Ratchet. Chief Medical Officer.”

You give him your name. “I'll try not to take up too much space.”

Ratchet snorted. “We'll see.” Spinning on his heel, he transformed into an ambulance (unmarked, you noticed) and drove out.

He seemed sweet.

You up at Optimus. “So, um. Question time?”
"Agent Fowler, your job is to conceal this group of aliens from the general populace."
Fowler: "Sure thing. They're people-shaped, right? Or at least people-sized?"
"Oh, goodness, no! They're twenty feet tall, with ample access to explosive weaponry. They're also based in a part of the country with sight lines for miles."
Fowler, already developing an ulcer: "..."
Open Clusters

Chapter Summary

Stellar clusters are collections of stars drawn into a group by their own gravitational force. They can be separated into two categories: globular clusters, or tight group of many thousands of old stars; and open clusters, usually containing a few hundred younger stars.

Chapter Notes

This is a LOT of scenes to cram into two thousand words. Like, not to self-criticize, but. This is a lot of scenes.
I'm gonna try to channel the energy from seeing the new movie into some (any) long-term planning; meaning hopefully things will start to move forward. Or not. In the meanwhile, have a cut scene with a side of original characters.
Once again, thank you for reading! I really enjoy hearing from you folks, whether you commented or kudo'd. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light years away, Wheeljack was reluctantly facing one of the universe's most disappointing truths: space, taken in its entirety, was usually slag on a stick.

It was either fragging super-heated plasma and neutrinos, or zilch. Nothing. Megaparsecs of void, marked only by the sift of dust and ice out the windshield. He had been taught that galaxies were mostly empty space--lumps of loosely defined stellar clusters and solar systems orbiting--supposedly--a supermassive black hole. It had never actually sunk in how empty the void would be.

It was slag. Space was slag. This whole thing was slag.

Wheeljack scrubbed a little harder at the machinery in his lap, cursing under his breath.

Good news! He thought irritably, flicking a wrist to the side. The greasy rag he had been ineffectually cleaning the navigational control board with slapped against the far wall with a disgustingly moist sound. The 'bridgeless space bridge' worked. Brainstorm was a genius. Bad news: Brainstorm wasn't as fragging much of a genius as he thought he was. And I'm paying the price.

He faltered, frustration flickering uneasily into something grief-ridden and queasy. I'm not even gonna get the chance to rub his face in it, way things are going.

Even if Wheeljack did find a way to steer the ship back to civilization before he ran out of energon—in other words, soon—he had lost track of the rest of the R&D team halfway through the last battle of Tetrahex. He and Perceptor were the only two combatant scientists the Autobots had left; they had always been needed in short demand, carrying supply teams through the enemy lines one blaster shot at a time. This time, though, Nautica and Brainstorm had dragged themselves along, insisted they
could hold their own…

Wheeljack ignored the way the frightened noise Brainstorm had made as a blaster had pressed to his neck echoed in his audials, loud against the background hum of the *Jackhammer*. He couldn't afford to look back. Not now.

(Not *ever*, if he could help it.)

With a grumble, he gave up the nav board as in perfect working condition. Therefore *not* something he could fix, in other words. Even after hours of work, Wheeljack still wasn't sure *exactly* why the Bridgeless Spacebridge had gone so far off-course. The lab trials had all been done via homing beacons—no onboard navigational controls necessary; just a receiver. In theory, the BS should have been able to pick up the signal of passing radio transmissions, and been home in short order.

Wheeljack *could have*, if the fragging thing had set him down within the *Jackhammer*'s receiver range. The only transmitters strong enough for him to lock onto were either slightly damaged religious artifacts or active duty Decepticons. Neither was a great choice. Out here, the only thing he was picking up was the odd pulsar.

Wheeljack slumped in the pilot's chair, staring listlessly at the display. The upper half of the *Jackhammer*'s windshield was taken up by the light of nearest spiral arm; the lower half, darkness so absolute it left an afterimage. Not bad, as far as oblivion went.

He could probably do worse, for a last view.

*Nope.*

Wheeljack bounced himself out the chair and onto his feet, feet clanging on metal panels as he paced. *Stop thinking. Keep working. Bad thoughts get people scrapped.*

He stooped to pick up an errant wrench. It nearly skittered through the grating, knocked flying by his trembling fingers.

*Pick something else to think about. Literally anything.*

What did he miss the most, he mused. Probably the company—no, the *conversation*. Wheeljack wasn't an idiot—he knew he could be a little. *Well.* And sometimes that meant he could come across as... *yeah.* But on the rare occasion he could make it an entire conversation without accidentally slagging somebody off, there was nothing better than having an audience. He liked answering questions, walking people through slag, watching the information settle in their processors. There was always a light in their optics as they just kinda *got it.*

Almost without realizing, Wheeljack went back over to poke at the engine, running routine maintenance. He wasn't always the best with all that *details* slag; he'd probably missed something. There'd be something he could fix. *Something* he could do.

With his head stuck under the console, Wheeljack almost missed the little green light on the control panel—a general message broadcasting on the Autobot frequency.

...
“However, the close proximity of the base, while necessary for our purposes, has opened us to a greater risk of discovery.”

“Why hide at all?” You asked, arms braced comfortably on the railing. “You’ve made contact with the government, right? That’s how you wound up so close to Jasper. Why not go for it?”

“The political climate we find ourselves under today is arguably the worst-case scenario for initiating first contact with another species,” Optimus said patiently. “We are only fortunate we did not come to blows with your people.”

“Jeez. Humans really are that bad, huh?”

“I was speaking of the Cybertronian race. But yes, we share many commonalities.”

Eventually, you apparently grew visibly tired enough that Optimus politely asked you to return to the base tomorrow, if you had nothing more pressing going on, and offered you a ride home. You accepted—you assumed you’d be accepting a lot of rides home, seeing as your truck was now a fond memory—and Optimus himself transformed and swung open a door.

You climbed up into the cab, just as Dad taught you to, and sat with your hands folded firmly in your lap and your ankles crossed. This was the equivalent of the Prime Minister of England taxiing you around town, you realized.

The desert passed by outside, indistinguishable in the darkness. You craned your neck to see the night sky, as Optimus drove in silence.

“You know,” you told him to stave off sleep. “A month ago, I’d have been over the moon about this. Once I got over the, you know, the mortal terror, I thought seeing you was the highlight of my year.”

“May I ask what changed?”

“Nothing, actually. I still think it's cool. Just.” You yawned, sinking into the seatback. “It's different when it's real. When you guys are real. Can't geek out over giant robots when they're, like, immigrants fighting a civil war. Not when they're people. You have to look after them and make sure they're okay, just like everyone else.”

He was silent for a long moment. “A refreshing attitude.”

“Mmph.” You gave the door a sleepy pat. “Life sucks. We don't have to, though.”

The next thing you remember, Optimus was waking you up to urge you to go into the house and rest. If there was a hidden note of warmth in his voice, you were too out of it to notice.

…

When you were twelve years old, you begged your parents to buy you the radio set you saw at an antique store one day. You would sneak out into the loft—the highest point on the property—and aim the receiver at the ceiling, hoping against hope to pick up something, anything. Any chance that you weren't alone in the big, cold universe.

Night after night, all you ever got was the local stations. You didn't actually understand how radio telescopes worked.

Years later, nursing the piece of apple pie you probably shouldn't have gotten for breakfast, you wondered what that starry-eyed little cosmonaut would think of it all now. You liked to think your
younger self would be pretty jazzed about it.

You definitely would've been scared of Optimus, though. You hadn't even liked your father's tractor-trailer, even without it standing up and trying to talk to you. It had made you feel too little to notice, like it might roll right over you. Ironic, for someone obsessed with stargazing.

You had woken up the following morning feeling like a muddy bootprint, as per usual the morning after a bad shock. You just loved adrenaline crash; it was right up there with beer commercials and dentist appointments.

Rather than lay in bed for another hour, bemoaning your fate and doubting your sensibilities, you got up at five-thirty and walked across Jasper to the burger joint/diner at the edge of town.

You liked to split your patronage equally between the two restaurants in Jasper, if only to avoid alienating either half of the town. You weren't sure how the intense rivalry between the two began and you didn't like to think about how it might end; but in the meantime, you did your best to avoid exacerbating the conflict. The last thing you needed was some sort of fast-food Romeo and Juliet subplot encroaching on your life.

You chatted with Mr. Wen when he came out to take your order, and amused yourself waiting for your apple pie to bake by listening to his daughters regale you with tales of wrecking Mr. Callighan's Toyota with cans of shaving cream.

A vision of what would have happened had they tried that on the wrong car flashed behind your eyes. You weren't sure exactly how concerned with intergalactic incidents you had to be now, but you were pretty sure petty vandalism was a low bar.

Your apple pie arrived, piled with whipped cream and pecans. You tucked in, savoring the true glory of adulthood—the ability to recharge from a stressful situation with the kind of ungodly inappropriate food that would have sent your grandmother into conniptions. You controlled your destiny, and it was sprinkled with cinnamon.

The bell over the door rang. Across the room, William Fowler sat down with a cup of black coffee and a sunken-in look on his face. He had some sort of desk job associated with the local park rangers, you had heard, although you had rarely seen him around town in months. The man always looked half-dead; you assumed he was less misanthropic as he was horrifically, inhumanly busy. The six AM version wasn't an improvement.

Stirred with pity and honest concern for your fellow man, you flagged the owner down as surreptitiously as possible. “Mr. Wen?”

The tiny little man skittered over, as oddly rodent-like as over. You nodded across the room. “Think you could charge Mr. Fowler's coffee on my tab?”

Mr. Wen's round, well-smiled crabapple of a face creased into a grin, leaning in secretively. “Shall I tell him who it's from?”

“Nah.” You fork over enough to pay your tab off. “Just to pay it forward, that's all.”

His eyes lit up. “Ooh, how very clandestine!” He fluttered his way around your table, tucking away your cleared plate and re-filling your water, casting looks at Mr. Fowler over his shoulder all the while.

As Mr. Wen cleared away your dishes, you accidentally locked eyes with Bill, looking significantly more awake after his first cup. The moment he saw you, his entire face soured. He drained his mug
and tossed a wad of bills on the table, hurrying out with one more glance in your direction.

“Well!” Mr. Wen huffed, looking significantly more put out than you felt. “I suppose he's taken care of! I hope there isn't some sort of trouble?” He leaned in eagerly, clearly hoping there was some sort of trouble. Jasper and its gossip, you swore.

You shook your head, mystified. “I've only spoken to the guy once, and that was—jeez, months ago.”

Mr. Wen looked comically put out.

You shot him a wry look. “Sorry, Mr. Wen. No gossip here.”

“Lies and slander,” he huffed, eyes crinkling even further. Mr. Wen's primary mode of communication was his wrinkles. The more emotional he got, the more he looked like a jittery, happy bulldog. “Still, after a kind thing like that, too.”

“Eh.” You could already feel yourself forgetting all about it. “Put the next person's coffee on my tab, then. I guess he's set.”

Mr. Wen's reply was drowned out by the sound of a powerful engine revving outside. A familiar-looking blue motorcycle was idling in the parking lot, gleaming in the morning light. You glanced down at your lap, suppressing a groan.

In your half-awake reverie, you had walked across town in fuzzy plaid pajama bottoms and an old band T-shirt that had been handed down from your grandmother. Since then, the band T-shirt had acquired a smear of stray apple filling on the stomach. If you were going to pick the worst outfit possible for (a job interview? Debriefing?) something like this, what you were currently wearing would have made honorable mention at the very least.

You made your goodbyes to the Wen family and closed the door firmly behind you. You approached the motorcycle cautiously. You were alone in the parking lot, and a glance through the windows showed that Mr. Wen had summoned both daughters into the kitchen. “Good morning?”

“Hello again,” said the motorcycle, in a much higher register than you were expecting. You kicked yourself for assuming Autobots would all present as male, and steadfastly ignored the implications of gendered extraterrestrial robots. For the most part.

“Arcee,” she said. “I already know who you are.”

“Yeah.” You shifted awkwardly. “Sorry—I know we're on a time crunch, but could we stop by my place?”

“For?”

You gestured at yourself, feeling foolish. “Uh. These aren't interview clothes.”

“I think you're overestimating the amount of formality we stand on,” Arcee said. She sounded amused. Was that a good sign? “Particularly since we don't wear clothes. But fine, if you're quick.”

“Thanks.” You fumbled with the helmet—it had been a few years—but swung over the seat with no problem. You had forgotten how much fun it was to ride a really nice motorcycle. In the short time it took Arcee to get back to your house, you were smiling like a child.

You dashed in, wriggled your way into a button-down and some nice shoes, and grabbed your
phone and wallet on your way out. It was tempting to stuff a backpack full of duct-tape and flashlights and snacks the way you used you when you were little, but—professionalism. Professionalism and time.

(You stuck a penlight into your back pocket.)

“You look nice,” Arcee told you as you jumped the steps on your way back out.

You glanced down, as you hop back on. “Do I?”

“Beats me.” She paused, engine stalling for a half-second. “That was rude. Sorry.”

A lot of that going around that morning, apparently. “Don’t worry about it.”

She turned down the main thoroughfare, tracing the way Bumblebee and Raf took you. “You...it’s.”

She mulled it over silently. “It's good to meet you, finally. I'm posted in Jack's garage a lot of the time, and I see you when you come over to do the yard work.”

Ahh. You hadn't realized you were daytime television for an alien.

Strangely, that made you feel a little better. If she had already seen you lugging around a watering can in a sweaty tank top, there wasn't a lot of dignity to preserve. “Good to meet you too. Nice to know Jack's in good company.”

“Hm.”

The rest of the drive was silent.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's wondering, the Wen sisters leave Jack alone for the most part. Partially because it's not his fault he's aligned with the forces of Grease and Evil, but also because they're like, 60% sure Miko would come after them with a plastic wiffle bat, and they don't want to provoke her until they're good and ready.
Circumpolar

Chapter Summary

A circumpolar star appears to rotate around the north star without setting; meaning that it stays above the horizon at all times. Since the horizon changes with the observer's position, the number of constellations that appear circumpolar also changes with the observer's position.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, everyone! Fun fact: astronomically, there is absolutely no reason for the new year to start on January 1st. The nearest solstice is a whole ten days beforehand. It's just a random party day; which strikes me as oddly poetic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tunnel echoed with distant voices the moment the door slammed behind you. By the time Arcee emerged into the main room and you had hurried to hop off, the voice had convalesced into an angry, echo-garbled rant. You suppressed a groan—the last thing you were in the mood for was more unsettlingly tall rudeness. Reluctantly, you headed towards the voice. It sounded distantly familiar.

Arcee had unfolded into a graceful, startlingly pointy figure, face framed with light pink metal prongs that reminded you of the horns of a ram. She was much, much smaller than the others; although still larger standing up than any motorcycle had a right to be, as far as you were concerned. You followed her further in to discover the source of the shouting: none other than Jasper's very own William Fowler, hanging off half-over the edge of the catwalk landing and yelling bloody murder.

Optimus stood before him, face stoic. As you walked in, he turned to give you and Arcee a brief nod. Arcee crossed to take up post at the green consoles lining the back wall with a nod to you, giving the three of you a modicum of privacy.

Fowler leaned around Optimus' shoulder to see and cursed creatively. “Of course they're here, too. Why not give them a tour of the base!”

“That would have been later on the agenda,” Optimus replied.

Fowler's face turned the color of a fruitcake. “This is the part where you tell me you installed a sense of humor during your last overhaul.”

“Uh,” you cut in before he could start yelling again. “Excuse me. I know you folks are ostensibly 'in disguise'? But you've accidentally exposed yourselves to like four or five humans, and they all know each other. Not to cast aspersions, but…?”

“Thank you!” Fowler threw up his hands. “This one gets it! Who knows who else has seen your people waltzing around in broad daylight.” He sighed, visibly pulling himself together, and climbed
down the stairs to greet you. “Agent William Fowler, Special Forces. We've met before.”

“Yup.” You shook his outstretched hand.

“Hrm.” He drew himself up, frowning at you repressively. “I need to inform you that what you are dealing with is a matter of national security. As a citizen of the United States, the leaking of information on this matter or anything about it could result in legal charges against you.”

You blinked at him, unsure how to politely convey the fact that he was the absolute least intimidating person in the room right now.

“The risks,” Optimus cut in gently, “Have already been made known to them.”

Agent Fowler deflated, the fixed scowl on his face smoothing into exasperated disbelief. “Aw, you didn't.”

“They stumbled upon a battle between myself and Megatron some weeks ago,” Optimus outlined the situation, summarizing your little escapade the previous day. “In the interim between the two encounters, they observed much less unequivocal evidence of us in their day to day life.”

Agent Fowler looked between the two of you. “You just happen to stumble on a Con encounter, twice. In less than a month. And you just happen to know half the team. And you just happen to be about the only adult in Jasper who can keep a golf-hashed secret to save their life?”

“Indeed,” said Optimus.

“To be fair,” You crossed your arms. “Everyone knows everyone in Jasper. And the gossip mill in this town is just weird, I don't think most places are like that. But yeah, when you say it like that, it sounds a little contrived.”

Agent Fowler pressed his palms into his eyes, groaning. He turned to go, but paused. “Don't,” he jabbed a finger at Optimus, “Hire them, or whatever you're planning, until the background check comes back. Got it, big man?”

He stalked away without waiting for an answer. The two of you watched him board the elevator against the far wall in faintly uneasy silence.

“Agent Fowler...” Optimus began, once the doors had closed.

“Means well.” You crossed your arms. “Everyone knows everyone in Jasper. And the gossip mill in this town is just weird, I don't think most places are like that. But yeah, when you say it like that, it sounds a little contrived.”

Agent Fowler pressed his palms into his eyes, groaning. He turned to go, but paused. “Don't,” he jabbed a finger at Optimus, “Hire them, or whatever you're planning, until the background check comes back. Got it, big man?”

He stalked away without waiting for an answer. The two of you watched him board the elevator against the far wall in faintly uneasy silence.

“Agent Fowler...” Optimus began, once the doors had closed.

“Means well.” You clasped your hands behind your back, rocking on your heels. “And made some good points. The rumor mill in town has got to have heard of you.”

“Do you anticipate it becoming an issue?” Optimus asked.

“Me?” You were the opposite of qualified to have an opinion on something like that. You'd barely been in town for eight months!

He gazed at you patiently.

Reluctantly, you thought of Jasper; with its feuding restaurants and bored neighbors and narrow yards. It wasn't a pretty picture. “Aw, jeez. Uh. Well, Jasper’s isolated enough that most stuff comes and goes without leaving the town borders, but if it comes up and everybody’s talking about it? You're gonna want to deal with that.” You considered. “Some of the teens might get curious and come looking, but if they don't find anything, it'd probably just mutate into an urban legend.” you chewed your lip. “I really don't feel qualified to make any definite predictions. Jack might be a better
person to ask, working at K.O. It's one of about three social spots in town. If anyone's talking about anything, he'll hear about it sooner or later.”

Optimus seemed to digest this. “Thank you for your opinion. I assume you have many questions.”

You relaxed, relieved at the change of conversation. “Yeah—actually, can I stand up there?” You gestured at the catwalk. Optimus had knelt to address you, folding up to put his face near a level with human-height. That couldn't have been comfortable.

“Of course.” He straightened with a smooth, mechanical whirr. “The fridge is stocked if you have need of it.”

You stood by the railing, as you had the other night, mulling over where to start. You doubted questions like why do you all speak English or can you turn into anything besides a truck would gain you much traction. “So, what's the next step?”

“There is a precedent for your situation in the form of the children,” Optimus explained. “They have formed a type of support team; one centered around necessary non-combatant roles during conflicts, such as communications or remote infiltration. The system we have in place is an informal one, but ultimately, vital.” He paused, voice quieting. “Outside of combat, their roles as our friends and companions are…irreplaceable.”

“Like pets?”

Optimus' face twitched briefly in some unrecognizable emotion. “No. Or at least, their guardians do not see them as such.”

“Okay.” You had certainly hit some sort of nerve there, although you weren't entirely sure what kind. Talking to Optimus, you were rapidly realizing, was a bit like speaking to a slab of exceptionally polite granite.

Optimus paused the tiniest fraction, eyes visibly scanning your face. “Our personal alliances among your kind have proven as fruitful as our political ones. We would be happy to count you among that number.”

“There's no way I could walk away from this,” you said, thinking of the night sky, the smell of chicken broth in a thermos, the screeching clash of metal hitting metal. You felt strangely shaky.

Optimus bowed his head. “I confess I gathered as much,” Optimus said. He turned away, missing or ignoring the funny look you shot him. “Arcee. Would—”

A bass-jarring THOOM shook the building. The catwalk lurched for a terrifying moment, pitching on the diagonal with a groan of metal. You stumbled into the railing with a painful jolt.

Optimus' voice boomed. “Autobots, report.”

Arcee and Optimus were silent for a long moment—listening on internal comms, you supposed. You held your breath.

Arcee deflated first. She flicked her wrists, face relaxing into irritation. “Ugh. Primus.” The blades that had snapped out of her forearms, like tonfa sticks, sheathed themselves.

Optimus' shoulders relaxed slightly, his voice losing its edge. “One of the older walls was accidentally knocked down. There were no injuries,” he said, for your benefit.
“Jesus.” You stood upright, uncurling your hands from the railing with a conscious effort. Your knuckles had gone white. “And the entire building shook?”

“Fragging Bulkhead.” Arcee made for the hall, scowling. She moved so much faster than the others; thin, sharpened edges sliding through the air like blades. Her hands were shaking, you noticed. “I'm never letting him hear the end of this. Sounded like heavy ordnance.”

You followed them down the hall, jogging to keep up. A few doors down, you turned the corner on Bulkhead, sitting sheepishly in a pile of plaster and rubble. You kept your distance, thinking of the apparent age of the building.

“Hey, guys.” He had to lean around Ratchet, who was scanning his potato-shaped frame with an ingrained scowl. “Nothin' to worry about. Just walked into the wrong support, that's all.”

“Bucket brain,” Arcee snapped, pacing the hall a respectful distance away. “You sounded like a pack of Cons, genius.”

“Arcee.” Optimus held up a soothing hand. “Ratchet?”

“He'll be out of commission for at least the morning.” Ratchet flicked his wrist. The scanner disappeared under his armor as though it had never been. “His vents need expelling, and I don't have the clamps in his size. We'll have to do it the old-fashioned way.”

“The entire morning?” Bulkhead protested. “Over a little dust?”

“Yes, the entire morning,” Ratchet said sharply. “If you want to see Miko any time soon. Do you even know what's in this dust?”

You winced, taking a step back. Asbestos was a pain and a half.

“Ugh.” Bulkhead climbed to his feet. The plating on his chest clicked and separated in a way your brain said was wrong wrong wrong, releasing another poof of dust. It was hard to tell from your vantage point, but the upper half of his torso seemed hollow. “Sure, Ratchet.”

“And get them out of here!” Ratchet had finally noticed you. He made terse little shooing noises like you were a dog sticking its nose into the pantry. “I just said this slag doesn't mix with humans!”

You took another few quick steps back towards the main room. Ratchet was a little too volatile for you to exist in close proximity with. If he wanted some space, you had no objections. You skittered back into the main room, at Arcee's heels.

She didn't stop there, however. She snapped a quick, “I'm picking up Jack,” and tore up the ramp, engine revving before both wheels with on the ground.

You blinked after her, baffled.

“The war,” Optimus murmured, “Has had its effect on all of us.”

You closed your eyes. Graceful metal hands clenched into fists, and the strange edge to Arcee's voice. Sounded like heavy ordnance.

Then you thought of the moonlight shining off Optimus' back as he knelt alone in the middle of an alien desert, and craned your neck back. His eyes had gone strangely dim, lenses swiveling open and closed as though tracing movements that weren't there.
You struggled for something to say, and gave up. "Optimus?" He blinked, and stooped to face you. You ignored the cornered-prey reactions your brain was still half-heartedly trying to bug you with. "Would you still be up for that tour of the base, or would another time be better?"

"Now will do fine." Optimus studied you, before turning down a side corridor adjacent to the one with the collapsed wall.

After an uneasy moment, you followed.

...

Bulkhead, freshly decontaminated and smelling reassuringly of strong disinfectant, dropped you off on his way to pick Miko up. You chatted on the way, exchanging music tips—he knew most of the British Invasion bands, but his knowledge of American classic rock was strangely lacking—and whatever other small talk came to mind. He seemed amiable enough, in a way that reminded you of one of your dad's old coworkers. If you didn't glance at the empty seat beside you, you could have been talking with one of the good ole's who hung around the diner in the evening, telling stories and pretending to play poker.

As you closed your bedroom door behind you, you reflected on how weirdly human they all seemed. Technically speaking, the fact that they were even remotely recognizable as sentient was unbelievably at best—they could have been space squid, or clouds of chemicals, or anything else. For all their similarities, though, there was something other in everything they did. The expressions, to be perfectly frank, creeped you out. It was weird to see something so obviously inhuman smile and frown and laugh and mean it. You kept trying to keep yourself from showing your teeth, like with monkeys.

Uncanny Valley effect aside, there was something...contrived about the way they moved. Not dishonest, but awkward, as though they were using motions they weren't accustomed to. Like dancers learning entirely new steps.

You groaned, looking back on the morning. You were sure there were body language cues you had been missing—the eyes, maybe? Bumblebee's false wings had shifted and fluttered as he 'talked', but Arcee's hadn't. Ratchet had been surrounded by the faint hum of electronics. Optimus' face barely moved.

For all their—you were going to call them eccentricities, there was no need to be mean about it—you were strangely charmed. They were just big, polite...there was something affectionate and vaguely maternal that had reacted to Arcee's awkwardness and Bee and Raf's kindnesses (and Bulkhead's mixture of both) that wanted to classify them as sweethearts or goofy dorks, although you hesitated to let yourself think of them so familiarly.

"I am not adopting a bunch of robots," you announced to your empty room. "They don't need it. They wouldn't appreciate it. I need to respect their agency and their privacy."

The resounding silence felt politely incredulous. It occurred to you that you had been in constant company for the entire morning. You tended to get defensive after high-tension interactions with people.

You collapsed on your bed, on top of the covers and shoes still on. Alien social cues could wait until after a nap.

...
There was a gentle knock on the front door. You groaned, sitting up, as the door opened with a faint creak. June's voice called down the hall. “Hello? You alive in here?”

“Barely,” you answered, opening your door. June was still in her hospital scrubs, hair clipped back in a neat ponytail. She held a covered dish, holding it by the side like it was hot. “Jack told me you had a bit of a rough day, so I thought I'd repay you for all that yard work.”

“June, you're my favorite.” You stifled a yawn. “Not my favorite anything in particular, just in general. What time's it?”

“A bit after three,” June said, doubling back to your kitchen. You got out the plates, while she uncovered something baked and cheesy. “Shepherd's pie sound good?”

“My favorite,” You said again, meaningfully. “Jack tipped you off?”

“Just in passing.” She forked a generous square onto one plate and a smaller rectangle onto hers. “I'm sorry about that truck, you know. It's always tough, losing a vehicle you put a lot of mileage on. Like an old friend.”

“Oh.” You took your plate over to the breakfast counter, resisting the urge to fiddle with your fork. Lying to June—especially about something related to her son, her only family—put a bitter taste in your mouth. You imagined a future full of conversation made of half-truths and misdirection, especially in the face of June's kindness.

The real challenge in keeping a secret wasn't the people who didn't trust you. It was facing the people who did.

“Yeah,” you told June, heart twisting. “It was a goodie. I'm sure I'll get a new ride, though. A couple of friends have offered to let me carpool.” Ugh. “There're vehicles all over Jasper, after all.” Ugh. “Maybe, uh, maybe someone will have one looking for a home.”

June gave you an odd look, climbing up onto the stool next to you. “Are you alright? You look pale.”

“I'm fine,” you said, distinctly less than fine. “It's...yeah. Without going into it, let's just say this is some perfectly timed shepherd's pie. Thanks.”

She shot you a piercing look. You tried not to squirm. Why were moms always like this? It was like lying to the Pope. Even if you weren't Catholic yourself, they were specifically constructed to be difficult to lie to.

“Oh.” You took your plate over to the breakfast counter, resisting the urge to fiddle with your fork. Lying to June—especially about something related to her son, her only family—put a bitter taste in your mouth. You imagined a future full of conversation made of half-truths and misdirection, especially in the face of June's kindness.

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“Okay,” June said. “If you need anyone to talk to, I'm here. I mean it.”

You smiled, trying not to feel like the scum of the earth. “Wilco.”

She held your gaze for another moment, nodding slowly.

“And as for the pie,” she continued, looking down to dig into her food, “It's certainly better than drinking chicken stock all day.”

“Chicken what now?”

“Stock. Chicken broth?” She jerked her head towards your recycling bin. The cartoon face of a chicken stared back at her from the front of an empty carton. “I guess that's not a thing, in Massachusetts?”
“I’m not from Mass,” you said, although you practically were. You had lived within a few miles of the state border all your life. “And I don’t drink it that much.”

“You drink it like coffee.” June grinned, pointing her fork at you accusingly. “The human body needs a varied diet to maintain itself.”

You wrinkled your nose at her. “I do too have variety in my diet.”

“What was the last vegetable you ate?”

“Celery and carrots.”

“Prepared as?”

You had put them in chicken broth with noodles. “Um. Steamed?”

“Mm-hmm.” June took a dainty bite.

You wrinkled your nose at her. “Do I come into your house and--? No actually, fuck. I do come into your house and judge what you eat. I keep having to make you bagged lunches,”

June snorted unattractively into her pie. You grinned, trying to shake the last of the guilt from your shoulders.

…

After June left, you did your laundry. You scanned the NASA app for news. You watched the first episode and a half of an incredibly uninspired cartoon before deciding that the fleeting nature of life didn't allow for kitschy love triangles and bad animation. You did anything and everything you could think of, as long as it didn't pertain to aliens, wars, or secrets.

As you were shoving your feet into sneakers to walk to the supermarket, you got a text. This is Bill Fowler. Thought you might need the contact details for our mutual friends.

When you saved the number attached, the icon automatically saved itself as a rectangular red face.

Subtle.

Chapter End Notes

Arcee: So you know your next door neighbor?
Jack: Yeah? What about them?
Arcee:
Jack:
Jack: Arcee, what about them?
Lippershey

Chapter Summary

Hans Lippershey (sometimes spelled Lipperhey) applied for a patent on telescope in the early 1600s. At the time, the device consisted only of a concave lens aligned with a convex objective lens. Although some people insist the telescope should be accredited to Lippershey's colleague, Zacharias Jansen (inventor of the compound microscope), there is no evidence to support this either way. Regardless, whether it was Lippershey or Jansen who first invented it, it was not until Galileo that a telescope was modified to be in any way suitable for use in astronomy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

You opened the door. “Miko?”

She was zipping from side to side on your front porch, balancing on her heels in a bizarrely smooth motion. Her hair was freshly dyed bright, eye-searing pink, pigtailed pulled into an even jauntier angle on top of her head than usual. If anyone could turn 'trouble' into a fashion statement, it was Miko. “Dude! Welcome to the club!”

She rolled past you into your home, as you wondered, with a jolt of existential horror, who had sold Miko Nakadai heelies. “Uh. Good morning?”

“How are you not freaking out?” She crossed her arms, heelying in place. As if she wasn't a constant source of movement already.

“Wheels off inside, Miko.” you closed the door. You were on the clock, technically; but you were waiting for data to compile, so you could probably afford to be away from your desk. “Don't you have school today?”

“Psht. School.” Miko waved a hand, plunking into a chair to fiddle with the soles of her shoes. “It's a holiday in Japan, so not really.”

Was that how it worked?

“But you got to meet the bots!” She bounced in place, beaming. “You got to meet Bulkhead! I can't believe you got to see Megatron, like, forever ago. So unfair.”

Her eyes were positively glittering. There was something about the exuberance in her voice that caught on. You resisted the urge to smile, lips quirking. “I guess? You make it sound like I got a red carpet invitation.”

“No, you got way better.” she grinned, leaning in. “What did you think? Who's your favorite Bot? Bulkhead's the coolest, right?”

“Uh.” She made it sound like they were superheroes. Perhaps to her, they were. “They seemed pretty hard to compare? Bulkhead seemed nice.”
“Bulkhead can rip a ‘Con, like, in half.” She grinned, gesturing demonstratively with both hands.

He could? “He...seemed nice?” You said, again. There wasn’t a lot you could say to something like that.

Miko tilted her chin, oddly proud. “Yeah, he’s awesome. We’re like total besties. Sometimes we go off-roading and listen to rock music. It slams.”

“I can imagine.” You supposed that explained Bulkhead’s narrow yet well-defined knowledge of rock music. “I thought you guys were non-combatant support.”

Miko snorted. “You’re such a mom, you sound like Ratchet. I’m not supposed to go along to battles technically, but we can like, help patrol and stuff.”

“Gotcha.”

“So?” She gestured at your door expectantly

“So?” You repeated, lost.

“So are you coming along today, or what?” Miko stood up and paced around to lean on the back of the sofa, rolling her heely wheels in her hands.

“I’ve got work.” you jerked your head toward your office. “Besides, I don’t really know what use I’ll be at the base unless something’s up.”

“Oh my god. Is this just like, how Americans are?” Miko stared at you. “Robots! Giant robots! Who want to be friends! How do you need an excuse to go hang out and chill?”

“Miko, I can’t just go and chill at a foreign military base.” Especially one where the personnel could step on you if they weren’t careful. “They’re trying to win a war.”

“Oh.” Miko deflated a little, looking more serious than you’d ever seen her. “Yeah. Fair. It’s not like they’ve got anything to do when they’re at base, though. It’s either patrols or Comms, and they need, like, one person at Comms unless they’re fighting.” She shrugged defensively. “I think we help, anyway.”

You relented. Just because you were a boring adult didn’t mean you had to ruin everyone else’s fun. “Optimus certainly made it sound like you do. I’ll be over after work, okay?”

Miko brightened like a light bulb, grinning. She popped the wheels back into her shoes. “Fine, I guess.” She crossed her arms, tongue poking out. “We’ll be back around to pick you up at three, okay?”

“Four?”

“I guess.” She heelied backward out your door, pulling it shut behind her.

You blinked at the empty door, feeling just as wrung out as you usually did when talking to Miko. Okay?

…

“So my exchange program has this weekend thing where like, I go and ‘experience a piece of American culture’?” Miko made air quotes, slumping against the passenger seat. “And like, yesterday they made me go to church and it was awful. It was like a classroom, but if the teacher was really
hard to understand and the other students were super old.”

“Huh. Weird.” It probably said something depressing about Bulkhead that Miko was so easy to talk to. She was always cheerful, always scrapping for a fight; like she was where the enthusiasm that had been slowly filtering out of Bulkhead over centuries of war had all gone to. It felt disrespectful to the energy that poured out of Miko to claim that she reminded Bulkhead of himself, but…eh. Maybe it was that Bulkhead kinda wanted to be her, to have that drive that forever pointed itself straight in the direction she wanted to go—regardless of anything and anyone that tried to stop her. Bulkhead personally called it a job well-done if he wound up smashing the thing Optimus needed smashed, and not, say, Autobot assets. Or Earth cars.

Bulkhead gave a little mental shrug, brushing the thought away. Miko was good because she was Miko. “Did you learn anything about American culture?” He asked. Another nice thing about Miko: the more she complained about her lessons, the more Bulkhead got to learn about Earth. He didn't have the broadband installed for constant Internet searches, like Arcee or Ratchet.

“That it's super boring and thinks it's way older than it actually is?” Miko slouched against his door, drumming her fingers to the music. “Yeah, real shocker.”

Bulkhead chuckled. “First of all, nothing gets to call itself ‘old’ until it's at least five centuries old.”

“Right?” Miko sighed. “In Japan, we have buildings that are older than that.”

“Yeah. But it couldn't've been all bad, right?”

“Bluh.” She considered, fingers tapping faster. “I don't know. They didn't actually really give any like, inside info? So I was kinda just sitting with my host parents. When I wasn't, you know. In total snoozeville. Oh, but guess what happened last week!” Miko brightened, straightening like the change in subject had refreshed her energy. “You know that diner Jack's boss is in hate with?”

Not even kind of. “Yeah?”

“Well, the owner's daughters got a bunch of shaving cream cans and put them in Jack's boss' car, and they got left in the sun? And like, his car's seats are just trashed.” Miko hopped a little in her seat for emphasis. “It was brutal. Also maybe don't park near the restaurants from now on, they're kind of hazard zones these days.”

“Gotcha.” Bulkhead pinged a status update to that effect on the group frequency. He got acknowledgment signals from the boss and Arcee, a sarcastic glyph Bulkhead hadn't seen for at least an orn from Ratchet, and a commiseration tag from Bee. Raf must've said something.

“So,” Bulkhead said. “When are we picking up the newbie?”

“Uhh.” Miko checked her watch and cringed.

“Right about now, huh?” Frag. They were still about twenty minutes out.

“More like, um. Ten minutes ago?”

“Miko…” Bulkhead sent them a quick text, fervently hoping Fowler had given Optimus the right number.

Miko groaned, palms pressing at her hairline. “It's okay, right? They're like, super chill, and also you're really fast when you need to be, right?”
“I can't pour on the speed on an Earth road because of a scheduling error—hang on.” Bulkhead's processor buzzed unpleasantly with the harsh tones of earth tech. *It's fine?? Miko agreed on four, I thought.*

“They said you told them four?” He sent back an emoticon he hoped conveyed that they were sticking to the original plan. Emoticons were *like* glyphs, right?

“...Oh. Yeah.” Miko sighed, relaxing. “I think I just gave myself a heart attack, ugh.” She paused. “...Sorry.”

“Miko...” It was hard to chew Miko out for that kind of stuff, especially when Bulkhead had done the same thing. Ratchet had told him once it was because his internal filing systems didn't work right—a lot of bots in his caste had problems like that, processing power diverted to applications like deep scanning and structural analysis. He could spot a fault in a support beam at three hundred paces, but Miko had had to tell him Raf's name at least three times before it stuck. “Don't worry about it, okay? We'll start to head over now, take the scenic route.”

“Okay.” She sighed, shoulders lifting, spine relaxing, heart rate returning to baseline. Another Miko Thing that Bulkhead was a little envious of—she just kinda *bounced* from stuff like this, like she didn't have to worry about mistakes or messing things up. Like she had faith she'd get it right the next time.

At Miko's request, Bulkhead cranked the music up, the windows down. They *howled* down the road.

... 

“Guys! Check it!”

“Who the *frag* put *wheels* on humans?” Ratchet muttered, at conversation volume. You weren't sure if it was his size or his lack of regard for who might hear him, but the number of under-his-breath statements that could be discerned from across the room on the catwalk was staggering to you.

Miko spun in a tight circle on her heelies, undeterred. Raf and Bee clapped politely.

“So,” Arcee leaned on the catwalk, each of her fingers as wide as your ankle. “You do stars?”

“Um, kinda.” You said. You didn't really expect to be an expert on outer space in a room with a bunch of aliens and Raf in it.

“She set up my telescope.” Raf offered, glancing up from his laptop.

“Hey, nice!” said Bulkhead, in the general tone one might use to congratulate a kindergartner on their art skills.

Arcee nodded. “Okay, so Earth astrology. I have some questions.”

You looked up at her, blandly. “...No.”

The console board lit with about four dozen blinking red *ERROR* messages layered on top of each other, thankfully drawing Arcee's attention. Raf sighed, picking up his laptop. “Ratchet?”

“This is the *fourth* time *this week*.” Ratchet snarled at the screen, as though it was acting up to personally offend him.
“You guys keep having to run too many programs at once,” Raf explained, plugging the cord snaking under the keyboard into his laptop with a faintly tired aura. “Your software is just designed for more memory.”

“The memory is fine.” Ratchet tapped at the keyboard. One more error message popped up. “The operating system, on the other hand, keeps having conniptions over the modifications I've had to make.”

“Maybe I could help?” you offered, walking closer. “I do computer stuff for a living.”

Ratchet looked down at you. “Do you, now.”

“She could take a look?” Raf suggested.

Ratchet sighed dramatically. Everything Ratchet did was dramatic. You were never quite sure how to take it. It was like he was slightly angry at his baseline, like a clock that struck midnight when the hands still read 11:58. “Fine. Don't touch anything, though.”

You weren't sure exactly how you were going to troubleshoot without at least clicking around, but you accepted Raf's patched-up computer with as much good humor as you could muster. You glanced at the screen, automatically searching for the taskbar, and--

For a single fleeting second, you felt the planet cease to turn underneath you. “Windows?” you croaked, staring first and Ratchet, then Raf, with disbelieving eyes. “you're trying to run all this with-” You choked, voice rising into a hoarse screech. “Windows ME?!”

Raf groaned despairingly. “I know.”

“It was the OS installed on these computers when we received them,” Ratchet huffed. “It's been the equivalent of constructing buildings with cardboard.”

“Oh my god.” you put your face in your hands. “Okay. I get why you're so angry all the time now.”

“I am not,” Ratchet snapped.

“What does the M.E. stand for?” Bulkhead asked. He and Arcee had gathered closer at the sound of your anguished wail.

“What does the M.E. stand for?” Bulkhead asked. He and Arcee had gathered closer at the sound of your anguished wail.

“Might Explode,” Raf told him.

“It's a miracle it's even running,” You muttered. Your respect for Ratchet's skill and patience had increased exponentially. You started typing, sorting through files. The mouse skittered unwieldily across the screen. “God. Okay. How many of your programs can be moved to...let's say Linux? Linux.”

“It's all written in Cybertronian programming,” Ratchet said warily. “Far more versatile than any programming language I've come across on this mudball.”

“Okay. What's the language, though?”

“Cybertronian.” Ratchet looked at you like you were being unforgivably stupid.

“Okay,” Raf said. “So, earth programming languages are conversational languages modified to interact with computers, right? With Cybertronian, it was the other way around.”

“What?” You stared at him, and then Ratchet. “I—but—”
“Did you guys break the newbie already?” Arcee asked. “It's been less than 48 hours, you two.”

Raf took his laptop back before it could slide out of your lap. “Yeah, it's really cool. Ratchet? How long would it take to switch everything over?”

“If we ask the Decepticons if they'd like to take Thursday off?” Ratchet said bitterly. “Around 13 hours. The problem is that I've modified everything specifically for the current OS. Even if I bypass the UI entirely—which involves plugging my own processor into the console, which is exactly as uncomfortable as it sounds—it would take weeks of work to untangle everything.” He paused, considering. “It might be better if I dig out some of the old versions. Optimus keeps backups; I'll ask him how many of the old updates he has on file.”

Ratchet turned back to the console, muttering to himself as if he'd forgotten that the rest of the room existed.

“I...” You shook your head. “How in the—why didn't anyone catch this before? You've been using this equipment for months.”

Bulkhead shrugged. “Don't think anyone other'n Raf's really looked at the stuff since they gave it to us.”

“Huh.” That seemed off. You would have thought that a few people would be in touch to make sure Ratchet knew how to use it; although you didn't relish the idea of trying to explain things to the perpetually touchy, twenty-foot-tall doctor, either. Maybe they assumed Ratchet would call them if he needed them.

“Still,” You muttered. “Does Agent Fowler know?”

“He should, if he's logged onto his work email within the last six months,” Ratchet scoffed, glancing up. “I've certainly filed enough complaints.”

The error messages cleared. Raf pumped a fist in victory. You nudged him, grinning.

Bee buzzed at him from across the room, doors fluttering expressively.


“That,” Ratchet snapped, “remains to be seen.” He loomed closer, eyes fixed unwaveringly on you. “You're not to so much as come near our systems without supervision from myself or Optimus--” he spared a glance at Raf, and his face softened a fraction of a morsel. “--Or Raf, until such time as you have proven yourself. Clear?”

“Crystal,” you assured him, trying not to lean back in an attempt to put more space between you.

He snorted, turning back to his console.

“He means well,” Raf said, after a short pause.

“I heard that.”

“No, yeah, don't blame him,” you muttered, trying not to tremble noticeably. “All good.”

Arcee frowned at Ratchet. “They've got the all-clear.”

“They've got an 'all clear' from Optimus,” Ratchet retorted without looking round. “Which does not
grant them unlimited access to the *entire Autobot network*. If you need precedent, take Miko. She's not allowed to meddle in here, either."

“No, seriously.” You waved Arcee away. “I wouldn't want me messing with stuff either, if I didn't know what I was doing.”

Arcee shrugged. “Fair enough. The Darbys'll be back in town soon. If you'll excuse me, I've got a date with an empty garage.”

“Sounds thrilling.” Ratchet tapped the keyboard.

“You have no idea.”

…

After some hashing around—and by that, you meant that Ratchet only very reluctantly agreed once Optimus leveled a cool, nonjudgemental stare at him and asked why you were any different than Raf—it was agreed that you'd moonlight after work at the base, helping Raf and Ratchet transform their computer's operating system into something that wouldn't try to fart itself to death every time more than one person used it. Raf was a godsend—not only since he could translate Cybertronian into a programming language you actually knew, although that was essential, but because he acted as a buffer between you and Ratchet. As much as you seemed to rub Ratchet the wrong way, he had a heavily-disguised soft spot for Raf. As much as you seemed to rub Ratchet the wrong way, he had a heavily-disguised soft spot for Raf. It was, in your opinion, his saving grace—there were certainly times when you felt ready to tell Ratchet that if he really doubted your skills so much, he could write his own code.

Then there were the times when you were left to your own devices—once the programs had been translated, you were left to correct your own grammar, as it were; running simulation after simulation, hunting down bugs. Ratchet trusted you to that much by yourself, at least; although Raf would drop in when he could to peek over your shoulder.

Even Raf notwithstanding, there was always someone with you, whether by coincidence or virtue of your newbie status. Jack and Arcee were joined at the hip, and you'd watch them ping-pong snark at each other across the room at each other (Jack had a faint-yet-indelible sarcastic streak—who knew?). Bulkhead would sidle up to you and ask what you were doing, but never for long—Miko would usually drag him off within a few minutes. Still, you enjoyed his company—he always asked, even though he never seemed to understand your explanation.

Bee and Optimus left you alone, for the most part—Bumblebee, because kind though he was, you didn't understand a word of him; Optimus, because that simply seemed to be the way he was. The rest of the team seemed used to it; although the more he retired from conversations and excused himself to do other things, the more you had the sneaking suspicion he had a case of Fowler Syndrome—misanthropy as a symptom of way too much work.

*I am not adopting them*, you repeated to yourself, re-configuring the user interface for the third time to make sure it could scale large enough for Bulkhead's fingers.

Chapter End Notes

General Bryce: You gave a civilian child complete access to government systems?!
Ratchet: Mn. The same civilian child who sent you a written essay on how awful the
security at that VLA telescope your scientists are so fond of, in fact. General Bryce, forced to confront a world in which a twelve-year-old hacked the Jansky telescope: ...He still needs official clearance.
A 'parsec' is a unit of extreme distance, defined by the distance to an object where the object's parallax is equal to one arcsecond. Speaking more practically, a parsec is about 3.26 lightyears. It is notable that a parsec is a unit of distance, NOT time; despite what Star Wars would have you believe.

We dip briefly into the events of canon! We'll be in and out of familiar water for a while here; although that most certainly won't last. Thank you again for reading!

In spite of all evidence to the contrary, life persisted. As the weeks wore on, the Autobots became a staple of your day to day routine—a fact that didn't quite mesh with your overall view of reality, somehow. Despite the fact that you regularly spent breakfasts texting with Arcee or Miko over cereal and that the work you were doing with Raf and Ratchet was starting to cut into your stargazing time, it just seemed...disconnected. Like there was some sort of veil between you and the hollow mesa outside of town, and you were simply spending your time passing between one side of it and the next.

But that wasn't quite true, either. The Autobots were a revelation in and of themselves; and everything from watching the sky to buying milk seemed off, like the entire town had shifted just slightly to the left. Although you yourself were still an outsider in their lives, they were no longer strangers to yours. They were, if you felt like flattering yourself, your friends; or if you were a little more realistic, your amicable neighbors at the very least. Jasper was good for that sort of relationship, really; As November loomed ever closer, you counted heads one day and realized that you were on speaking terms with...just about a majority of Jasper's total population. Go figure.

You would have liked to blame the fact that you were beginning to assimilate into Jasper for the fifteen seconds it took you to realize something was wrong, then; but in all fairness, it could also have been the fact that you were still a bit of a dumbass. Nevertheless, the longer you gaped at the plume of dust fading rapidly into the distance, the more you had to admit that, yes, that had been Arcee; yes, she had been driving hilariously over the speed limit, even for an old country road; that had indeed been a sports car struggling along in her wake; and yes, in fact, she had had none other than one Jackson Darby with her.

You tightened your fingers to keep from dropping your telescope, almost dazed by the surge of anger pounding away at your temples. You had lied—actively, objectively lied—to your best friend about the daily whereabouts of her only family on the sworn assurance that said family would be kept reasonably safe.
You were fairly certain street racing did not equal reasonably safe by any stretch of the term.

You took several long, deep breaths. When that failed to make a dent in your mood, you dug through your bag for your water bottle and took short sips, trying to calm down. You weren't going to be any use to anyone of you were angry to the point of incoherency. Panic and instinct weren't going to help you here.

Once you were merely seething instead of frothing at the mouth, you got out your phone and called Arcee.

She picked up on the second ring. “Little busy. Is this urgent?”

You could hear the faint sound of wind in the background. Your jaw clicked as you clenched your teeth. “I gathered. Meet me at the Darby’s garage in ten.”

You hung up. You stood where you were for a moment, staring at the sky; imagining the thin veil of blue sunlight-on-atmosphere, the thinner halo of space silt and meteoroids beyond that, and then the vast, cool nothing on the other side, stretching around for millions of miles, barely illuminated by the fantastically super-heated ball of hydrogen and helium located only seven light-minutes away.

It didn't make you less angry, but it calmed you down some, which was more useful in a lot of ways. Yelling wasn't going to do anything short of push them away—particularly Arcee, whose business was even less yours than Jack's was. You couldn't scream, you couldn't rant at them. And you most certainly weren't going to let them know how scared you felt.

This wasn't a betrayal of your trust. It wasn't. You couldn't afford to think of it like that; not if you wanted to stay calm. This was—well, it was whatever it was. You would get the story soon enough.

You hitched your telescope back onto your back—setting up your fancy new long exposure camera could wait until another evening—and walked back to town, enjoying the late October breeze, the sunlight. You'd let them sweat a little, first. You hadn't calmed down that much, after all.

... 

Jack and Arcee were already in the garage. Jack was pacing nervously, helmet in his hands. Arcee looked about as sullen as an non-emoting vehicle could.

“It was my fault,” Jack said, as soon as you rounded the mailbox. “Vince was egging us on, I shouldn’t've let--”

“I take full responsibility,” Arcee said crisply. If she was human-shaped, you would have bet she'd been standing at attention.

“It's not her fault, I was the one trying to--” Jack talked over her.

“I was put explicitly in charge of Jack's well-being--”

“Guys.” You held up a hand. They both fell silent.

“I'm not gonna lie,” you said carefully. “I am livid. I have enough faith in the both of you that I am shocked beyond words that either of you would think this was okay.”

The garage filled up with thick, awful silence.

“I don't--” you sighed. “I'm neither your superior officer nor your parent. You don't answer to me,
and I'm not gonna snitch to the people you *do* answer to out of belief that you are both, fundamentally, smart people.”

Jack’s shoulders relaxed.

“If this is a one time thing.”

The shoulders jerked right back up.

“Jack, you're old enough to make your own decisions. More to the point, you're safer with Arcee than on any other motorcycle on the planet.” You let the praise sink in for a moment. “*That being said.* Street racing is undeniably, *explicitly* illegal. *For a reason.* I know you're not gonna get each other killed, but unless you can extend that confidence to Vince? Nuh-uh. No.” Neither one of them was looking you in the eye. “*Assuming* Jack didn't get arrested.” You added, for good measure.

Arcee's motor faltered for an instant.

You sighed. “Think of this as...peer pressure. I'm peer pressuring you. Specifically, not to be idiots. Don't do this again, okay?”

Jack shifted. “Vince said that--”

You stared him down. He shut up.

“Understood.” Arcee’s voice was just this side of frigid.

You nodded. “Okay. So we're done.”

“See you,” Jack muttered. His arms were crossed, head bowed stubbornly.

You heard Arcee speak in a murmur as you shut the side door behind you.

Outside, you took a moment to ground yourself, pulse hammering. *Jack's fine. Arcee's fine. It was fine.*

It didn't *feel* fine.

You made yourself walk back to your house on shaky legs anyway. You had yelled at them...probably more than your standing with the Autobots warranted, but they had acted enough like guilty children being scolded by a teacher that you had powered through it.

As you finally put your telescope away and got a bowl out for soup, anxiety started to melt from a hard lump in your chest to a miserable haze pervading your entire body. You really, *really* hoped you hadn't crossed a line. You generally made an effort not to be preachy or controlling with the kids —it wouldn't be your place, even if that sort of dynamic *was* something you were comfortable with. And you didn't, didn't, *didn't* want to alienate the likes of Arcee, who, apart from being able to throw you around like a beanbag, was very good company.

On the other hand, you didn't feel right about not bringing it up with June. Or Optimus? June was the obvious choice, but Optimus *was* Arcee’s superior officer. On one hand, team leader. On the other hand, space court martial. You weren't sure exactly where you stood on that front.

You stirred your soup, letting the meat cook a little longer, and tried to breathe your stress out through your nose. The dye was cast, however you looked at it. Hopefully, you were at least annoying enough that they'd make an effort to keep out of trouble.
“Miko, Rafael.” Optimus' voice rumbled gently through the main room, catching your attention. “Have you seen the others?”

You looked up from your keyboard. The base had been uncharacteristically quiet that evening. You had foregone stargazing altogether in order to get the kinks out of the last bit of code Ratchet had processed earlier that day. Ratchet himself had paused to help you set up and promptly disappeared within the bowels of the base, muttering over supplies and order sheets.

Arcee, Bulkhead and Bumblebee were noticeably absent. You had only arrived a few minutes ago, but still—there was usually at least someone manning the comms station. Miko and Raf had been muttering to each other on the catwalk, playing video games or gossiping, or whatever it was they did together without Jack. There wasn't a lot of overlapping interests between the two of them, as far as you could tell.

You craned your neck to see over to where Optimus was peering down at them. They had both stood bolt upright, eyes on Optimus like he had pulled a gun on them. “No, sir,” Miko said, as if she had forgotten her English. “We do not know.”

“That is correct,” Raf said, robotically. “We have not seen them.”

You closed your laptop, something between amusement and existential disbelief settling in your bones. How were the Autobots still a secret?

Optimus shot them a deeply dubious look. Raf fidgeted harder.

“Guys?” You called. They both flinched. You climbed down from your perch on the console, alarm bells ringing in your head. “Where's Jack?”

“Uhhh,” said Miko. She looked a little sick.

“Neither one of us need to pry into your affairs,” Optimus said. You blinked, a little taken aback at being included as an honorary Concerned Parent. “So long as everyone is safe.”

Raf's shoulders stiffened like he'd been electrocuted.

You cursed faintly, putting the pieces together. “He's not. They didn't.” Optimus turned towards you. “Arcee and Jack were racing one of the local boys on one of the back roads the other day. They said--”

“And the others?” Optimus turned back to the kids, face grim.

Raf wilted under Optimus' gaze. You didn't blame him. “There was trouble.” He said reluctantly. “Knockout's got Vince--”

“You're kidding.” You stared at them, horrified. “As if it wasn't a bad idea in the first place?”

“We will discuss this later,” said Optimus. He turned away, presumably plying the comms for more information. “You two will stay in the base until we return.” He glanced to you. “I would be grateful for your assistance with the captive boy.”

“Yeah.” You were already shrugging your sweater back on. “Ready when you are.”

…
You tried not to seethe in Optimus' passenger seat.

“Arcee has explained your part in this,” he said, at length. “I appreciate your part in attempting to discourage them.”

You huffed. “I should've gone straight to June. Or you.”

Optimus was quiet for a moment. “You are upset by this.”

“Yup.” You unclenched your hands, finger by finger. “That's a word for it.”

Optimus waited patiently.

“It's just--” You rubbed your temples. “I wish Arcee and Bee had had a little more concern for the kids' safety, you know? Or Bulkhead, was he in on it?”

“Bulkhead and Bumblebee were the only Autobots taken into confidence.” His voice hardened a hair. “I will have words for both of them.”

“I guess I can't be angry at Arcee, then. I don't...” You sighed. “I don't feel right about the kids being out here. I mean, without their parents knowing. Having them take stupid risks like this is just...ugh.”

“I know.” Optimus sounded intolerably sad.

You winced. “I'm not blaming you.”

“I am. It is for the best for my soldiers that as few people know of our presence as possible. I cannot say whether it is for the best for our young friends that they keep this secret from those they're closest to.” He fell silent. Outside, the desert sped past.

“June would keep your secret,” You said, impulsively. “The Esquivels...don't pay Raf the attention he needs. Miko's hosts seem to afford her the bare minimum, but not a whole bunch beyond that. June, though...”

“I will take that under consideration.” Optimus drove in silence for a minute. “I apologize.”

“You weren't the idiot who went street racing.”

“For taking your confidence. These are not your burdens to bear.”

“But they are?” You floundered. “I mean? I know I'm new and all, but the least I can do is help out. You have enough on your plate.”

“We are not your charges.”

“I know.” You ducked your head. “Sorry.”

“I do not mean it as recrimination. I only...” He fell silent. On the road before you, headlights were fast approaching.

He slowed to a crawl, door swinging open. You hopped out, stumbling as you got your balance on the asphalt, and retreated to the ditch, eager to keep from becoming the center of attention again. Once you were clear, Optimus gunned it with a terrifying burst of speed.

Knock Out—the Aston Martin with whom you'd taken issue a couple weeks ago—skidded to a halt, trying to avoid the multi-tonne Peterbilt of an obstacle barreling down the road towards him. Optimus
transformed with a clatter just before impact, one arm looping around the sportscar like he was wrangling a pig. With a groan of metal, Optimus lifted Knock out by the bumper, one set of tires spinning irately in mid-air. He grappled around to reach the passenger door, and—

The ear-curling screech of tearing metal as Optimus tore one of his doors clean off set your teeth buzzing. Knock Out howled, spitting curses.

The sports car tore off without a word, evidently focused on putting as much distance between himself and Optimus as possible. You didn't blame him, after a stunt like that.

You focused on not backing away as Optimus approached, holding Vince as though he might break. Burning through your hesitation with an active effort, you edged closer, gesturing for Optimus to hold Vince down to your level. You hissed. “Out cold. There's a clinic about fifteen minutes from here.”

“Understood.” Optimus transformed, holding a door open. “You possess a class A license, correct?”

“Yeah? Oh.” You would have needed one in order to drive a big-rig; and Optimus would need a human to liaison with the medical staff. You tried to shake the muzziness out of your head. Focus. Panicking every time Optimus titched funny was a great way to develop hert problems and poor interplanetary relations at the same time. “Yeah, no worries.” You jogged around to climb into the driver's seat, strapping Vince in beside you. The kid needed to eat more; it was like maneuvering a rag doll.

You drove in silence. At one point, Optimus made a call to Fowler, requesting he deal with the authorities. Vince muttered once or twice, which made you hopeful he wasn't about to die.

Despite the lack of conversation—or perhaps because of it—the energy in Optimus' cab was strange, almost terse. You felt oddly as though you had made some sort of misstep; crossed some sort of line you shouldn't have.

You tried not to sigh out loud. It was too damn late for this.

You could not be more grateful June was not on staff when the two of you pulled up to the clinic, since it meant that the most you had to lie to was the incredulous-looking man who came out to help you get Vince through the door. You also could not have been more dismayed, since this meant June was at home, alone, wondering where her only son was.

You closed your eyes, trying to will away a headache. “Optimus? Arcee and Jack are still at base, right?”

He paused a fraction before answering. “They are.”

“Cool. Tell Arcee to inform Jack that she got a spare tire, but I ran into them and helped them out. He should be home within half an hour.” You dialed your friend's number, tasting the next batch of lies you would have to tell on the tip of your tongue. “While you're telling them, try to sound as paternally disappointed as you can possibly manage.”

…
“I am very disappointed,” Optimus said. “In all three of you.”

Standing on the catwalk half an hour later, you had an epiphany. Despite the fact that he stood taller than your house and outweighed you by an order of magnitude, Bumblebee was, in fact, just as much of a doofus teenager as the human kids. This was readily apparent as he, Raf and Miko stood side by side, guilt, exhaustion and mulishness writ large across their faces.

Jack would have been included in the line-up, had he and Arcee not been heading out the door just as the two of you drove in. The hollow, desperately guilty look of Jack's face and the grim set to Arcee's mouth had spoke volumes about how their en route conversation was going to go.

Still, you winced, sipping the questionable cocoa Fowler had handed you in lieu of a greeting, eyeing the minute expression of dissatisfaction dragging at the corners of Optimus' mouth. Perhaps Jack had gotten off easy after all.

“Through your actions and inaction alike,” Optimus continued, “you have all put our secrecy in jeopardy. Our presence on this planet, if it is to remain hidden, requires as much discipline as it does caution. Tonight, that discipline was very much absent.”

His voice never rose above conversation level, but the weight of it was obviously crushing. Miko looked even more mutinous than usual. Raf and Bee were, by your judgement, a few sentences away from tears. You decided then and there that the scariest part of Optimus wasn't his strength or his size; it was his disapproval. Your grandmother would have been impressed.

He regarded his audience gravely. “No permanent damage came of this night, provided the boy delivered into medical custody does not remember this evening. I want all of you to reflect on the consequences had this not been the case. Dismissed.”

“What, that's all?” Fowler muttered, next to you. His tie was crooked, as though he'd had to dress again to come out here. You were starting to realize exactly why he looked so exhausted all the time.

“Wait for it,” Bulkhead muttered.

The sound of metallic foot falls echoed ominously down the hall. Bee's doors drooped, optic cycling large and sad.

After a moment, a wide, stocky shadow seemed to loom in the hallway, despite the fact the main room was as bright as the corridor. “You three,” Ratchet said poisonously. “Medbay. Now.”

Jeez. You leaned away from Ratchet, trying not to call attention to yourself.

“Us?” Miko asked, sullen, even as she filed after Raf. “You're a Bot doctor.”

He pointed wordlessly. Contrary to popular local opinion, Miko did have some semblance of self-preservation; and so she shambled down the hall behind Raf, grumbling only a little.

“Bulkhead.” Bulkhead stiffened above you, turning reluctantly to face Optimus. “Once you have delivered our remaining human companion home, we will speak.”

“Gotcha, boss,” he said resignedly. He jerked his head at you. “Guess I deserve a little suspense. You got all your stuff?”

You retrieved your computer, watching Optimus out of the corner of your eye. He stood at the console, gazing at unintelligible lines of coding and data until the tunnel walls blocked him from view.
Chapter End Notes

Reader: I can't believe Optimus tore that guy's door off--
Miko, flipping through a scrapbook: Yeah, well, one time Bulkhead pulled this guy's fuel pump out!
Reader: That. That wasn't a brag, Miko.
The NASA Deep Space Network is a network of antennae dedicated to communication with everything from the Mars Rovers to deep space probes. It consists of three facilities positioned roughly 120 longitudinal degrees apart, each equipped with a 70 meter antenna and several 34-meter High Efficiency Antennae. Not only is the DSN an incredible feat of modern engineering; it is absolutely essential for deep space exploration. Since the majority of deep space probes are not equipped to return to earth, all interactions with them after launch, be it information gathered or repairs made, must be through the DSN. Without a viable mode of communication, these missions would not be possible.

In all honesty, you expected that to be the end of it. Everyone made it home that evening with a mixture of relative physical wellness and mild emotional trauma from the dual dressing-down from Optimus and Ratchet, and nothing worse. You, for one, were reassured. Nothing said 'let's never do this again' like quasi-paternal disapproval, lightly sprinkled with mild consequences.

For your part, you put a little extra space between you and the Autobots. You still weren't sure why Optimus had gone from (relatively) chatty to taciturn on the way to the clinic, and you weren't secure enough in your own diplomatic skills to want to push your luck. Wary of accidentally offending anyone else, you kept to the fringes. Arcee sought you out, briefly—to assure you that nothing of the sort would be happening on her watch again, ever—but other than that, you were mostly left to your own devices. After a scare like that, it was understandable that the group would be a little more insular for a while. You gave them their space...but kept your phone on. Just in case.

(Although in case of what precisely, you were still unclear. It wasn't as if there was a lot you could do to protect them if something did go wrong. You thought, sometimes, of inhumanly powerful engines rumbling with suppressed energy, movement passing through layers upon layers of solid metal to shake the carseat below you; and wondered why, exactly, you had ever thought they needed your protection, your help, your anything.)

Your phone stayed dark.
One morning about two or three days into your hermitage, you looked up from your breakfast to see Raf, walking down your street, shepherding Bumblebee in front of him like a skittish puppy.

You drank in the sight of a shrimpy twelve-year old shooing a bright yellow Camaro up the middle of the street, and wondered, once again, how in the fuck the Autobots were a secret. Swigging the remainder of your breakfast like a shot of whiskey, you hurried out the door.

“...C’mon, it's just like changing a tire, sort of. Just get it over with,” Raf was saying exasperatedly. Bee chattered something back, sounding petulant. You wanted to smack them both—they weren't even trying to keep their voices down. The last thing you needed was Mrs. Nguyen rapping on your door, demanding why 'that Esquivel child' was playing in traffic in front of your house. Or worse yet, June could see. Talk about worst case scenarios.

As you approached, Bumblebee made an odd whining noise, like a drill, and swiveled his tires to try to back around Raf. The boy jumped to get in his way.

“Hey, you guys,” you said. Bee's engine guttered despondently. “I know it's still early in the morning, but maybe a little more discretion?”

“Hi!” Raf said, brightly. He leaned pointedly on Bee's rear bumper, keeping him in place. “We were just coming to see you.”

Bumblebee whirred in what sounded like resigned agreement.

You didn't speak Cybertronian, but that didn't seem like a good sign. Still, you nodded as agreeably as you could. “Okay. You, uh, you wanna pull into the garage for a little privacy?”

“That'll work great!” Raf said, over Bee's beeping. He ran to help with the door.

That was...uncharacteristic, to say the least. Raf, thoughtful little soul with plenty of experience being talked over that he was, usually bent over backwards to let Bee have his own say. Likewise, Bee wasn't shy about getting his point across. This change in behavior was...striking. To say the least.

You wrestled a pair of cheap folding chairs into place in front of Bee's hood. Raf sat primly on the nearer one, hands folded into his lap. “I'm gonna be translating,” he announced. “But Bee was the one who needed to talk to you, actually.”

Bumblebee whirred nervously. He didn't seem to need to say anything. If anything, he had a sort of 'under duress' air about him,

“Uh. Okay?”

Raf settled comfortably in the chair and turned to Bee. “Okay. Go.”

It took a long moment for Bumblebee to begin. It sounded short, clipped, like a recording someone had sped up—like he was rushing through his words before he lost his nerve.

“The first part's honorifics,” Raf said, head cocked to the side to listen. “But he's using the ones for—wait, okay, here it is. He says, 'I deeply regret the rift between us and the actions that caused them. I offer you my individ—my personal apologies, and ask—and respectfully ask, sorry Bee—that my actions be taken as my own, and not as a reflections of my…' Family? Cadre? Ugh.” Raf blew a deep, frustrated breath out his nose. “I'm messing it up, I'm sorry. Bee practiced really good for this.”
Bee broke from the bird song into a shrill bleat of static, shifting on his shocks.

You...hadn't thought there was a rift between anyone? You had a hard time staying angry for ten minutes, let alone...however long Bumblebee had been stewing about this. Poor dear.

“Bee, buddy.” You ran a hand through your hair. “Jeez. Is this about the street racing thing?”

Bee chirped a low, wary affirmative. Raf nodded, looking put-upon. “Everyone thinks you're super angry about it.”

They did? Jeez. You blew a sharp, short breath through your nose, considering your words carefully. “Not gonna lie, I got pretty mad. But as long as everyone made it home? We're totally good. Don't do it again, and we're aces. Okay?”

Bee nestled on his shocks, lifting himself a little bit higher. “Okay,” Raf said, for him.

“And don't assume how I feel.” You were just going to gloss over the fact that you had made the same exact mistake. “If you need to talk, come and find me. If I need a little space, I'll do my best to let you know.”

“Understood,” Raf said, on Bee's behalf. He paused so that Bee could speak. You still weren't sure why it took Bee so long to talk to you, but you sort of wished he'd knock it off. “So, can Bee let the others know you're not angry?”

“Yeah?” Why wouldn't he?

Your phone had a seizure in your pocket, vibrating intermittently for a solid ten seconds or so. You took it out so that is could flutter around in your hand, staring at it.

Raf smiled apologetically. “They really thought you were mad.”

“Huh.” You glanced at the screen. Messages from Bulkhead, Arcee, and Optimus...along with a massive data packet from Ratchet. The work you had missed over your absence, you assumed. There was something to be said for a status quo. “Well, if it works for everyone else, I guess I'll see you all tonight? I'm sure Ratchet's ready to bury me under computer programming once more.”

Be chittered cheerfully. “Yeah!” Raf said. “Can we come and pick you up?”

“If you're in the neighborhood, I guess. You don't have to go to any trouble...” But Raf was already diving into the front seat.

“Sounds great, see you then, bye!” he called out the window. Bee peeled onto the street, beeping exuberantly.

Well. It was good that they were feeling better?

…

The texts turned out to be mostly, to your great surprise, more apologies. The kid's texts were less instantaneous, but they still got around to them startlingly fast. Arcee and Bulkhead's messages were short, but kindly meant, you thought; and the packet from Ratchet included a damages report on the other night. Vince was fine, although you had followed up on that yourself—and being doted on by his classmates for the conspicuous bandage on his head, according to a disgusted Miko. Jack had a large bruise on his foot where it had gotten stuck under one of Bumblebee's pedals.
Once you had sent off variations on a theme of *I'm not mad, I'm okay, I'll see everyone tonight*, everyone moved on to getting you up-to-date on what you had missed. It was basically four or five different tellings of 'almost everyone's grounded except for patrols, Bulkhead found a weird snake'; but you read them all anyway.

It was...kind of touching, in a way. You hadn't realized you had become such a fixture.

Optimus' message was the simplest—barely more than an acknowledgement—but the last line got to you. *Be advised that you hold a standing invitation at the base until further notice. You are always welcome.*

For someone as retiring as Optimus, that was practically a hug. Particularly since he had reason to be careful about how much trust he spared for outsiders. You breathed deeply, until your eyes stopped stinging, and wrote him back. *Thank you. I'll be around to help out as much as possible.*

... 

A couple hours later, there was a knock on the door. This was getting to be a habit. “Jack?”

“Uh.” he shifted in place, hugging his torso self-consciously in a move that ached of his mother. “Hey. Do you have a second?”

You stepped aside to let him past. “How’s the foot?”

“It’s...better.” He said carefully. One of his sneakers was a little thicker than the other—evidence of bandages, you assumed. “It was tough to walk on the first morning, but I told Mom I dropped something on it, and she helped me take care of it.”

He was hovering awkwardly in your hallway, so you gestured for him to follow you into the kitchen. You took out a couple mugs. “Anything to drink?”

“Not chicken stock,” Jack said automatically. Belatedly, he seemed to realize what he said, and winced.

“Tea sounds, um, nice.” You took the

That sounded about right. “I don't know what it is with your mom and tea. She makes coffee okay, but just heat up the water and drop the packet in and she's done. I think it makes her nervous.”

“You and...” Jack set his hands in his lap momentarily, then moved to cross his arms before thinking better of it. They wound up hanging weirdly at his sides. “You and Mom are close, right? Like, I know there was that thing with the yard work, but...”

“Yeah. She was one of my first friends here, you know. You guys are good people.” You took the
mugs out and dropped a teabag in each. “Here. Let that soak for a while.”

Jack bobbed the tea bag by the string, watching it intently. He had barely made eye contact since you had opened the door, actually. “So. Like. It's probably really hard for you to keep secrets from her, right?”

“Well, yeah, but she's not my mom.” Jack was giving you a weird look. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. He took a sip of tea, and cringed—it was still piping hot, no doubt. You offered him the sweetener. “Good?”

“Well,” he croaked.

“You can put some cold water in it, if you want.”

“Oh, thank god.” He shuffled to the sink, sheepish. “But she's still, like, important to you. What she thinks means a lot.”

“June? Yeah, absolutely. Both of you, actually, you guys are like family.” You sighed. “But...she's not my mom. And that's really where our situations start to lose comparability. Me keeping a secret from my next-door neighbor is leagues away from you keeping a secret from your legal guardian. Like it or not, it's her job to make sure you're okay. She has a stake in anything that could put you in danger.”

“I'm sixteen,” Jack said, the barest hint of a petulant whine coloring his voice. “I'm fine!”

“I'm not,” you said, calmly.

“Sure you are, as long as nobody moves near you,” Jack snapped, and immediately looked regretful.

You let the silence draw out, taking a sip of your tea. Jack took a breath a couple times, as though he was going to say something else. He didn't.

“I know they wouldn't hurt me on purpose.” you said, at length. “Of course not. The same way that I know they wouldn't let you get hurt. But—mm. Think of it this way. What do you think would happen if Bulkhead tripped?”

Jack's nose scrunched up.

“Yeah.” You nodded. “Everyone makes mistakes. When you're five-foot-something, those mistakes are scaled to about five feet. When you're fifty-foot-something...”

“None of them are that tall,” he muttered. His hands skittered nervously over his lap, though.

“Same thing. And I know that they're important to you guys, and that you're important to them? But it's still risky business, and your mom's still your mom. And she's a good one.” You breathed deeply. Once or twice, you thought about how much easier this would have been on you if she'd been a crummy parent. That, however, was a Fucking Awful Thought; and you immediately felt worse for having even entertained it.

“If I had my way, you'd have her to rely on in this,” you told Jack. “Because I know for a fact she'd support you.”

“…” Jack stopped. His voice sounded a little thick. “Yeah.”
“Yeah.” You took another gulp of tea, for lack of anything better to do. Today had an unconscionable amount of emotions in it, in your opinion. Tomorrow had better be full of Sudoku puzzles and unsalted tortilla chips. You could use a little non-descriptiveness after all this soap opera tomfoolery.

For now, you forged on. “So I admit, I kind of panicked at you guys the other day.”

“No, I...” Jack sighed. “Arcee kind of chewed me out for that, anyway. Or, like, one of the times I got chewed out was about that. No more racing.”

“Good.”

He laughed, suddenly. “Everyone though you were furious. Bee looked like his dog died. So did Optimus, actually, but if it was, like, a dog that was the last of its kind and held ancient secrets or something. You know how he gets.”

You winced. You did know. “I heard. I should've checked in sooner.”

“It's whatever, now.” Jack tipped his tea back. “Thanks for talking, um. And sorry again. See you tonight?”

“Sure, bud. See you later.” He let himself out. You stood in the kitchen, swishing the tea in your mug, watching the pale shreds of ginger accumulating at the bottom form abstract shapes.

“I'll be honest,” Raf said. “I kinda got the idea watching my sister play The Sims.”

The little human was perched—for necessity's sake, mark you—on Ratchet's knee, keyboard balanced neatly in his lap. The cords from it to the console were an irritant in and of themselves—particularly since Ratchet could neither risk tangling them nor move his right leg—but it was better than having the little pest on the console itself, where he might accidentally plant his rear on the wrong button and send the whole system crashing again. Ratchet had to admit the newest human's work was better than he had anticipated; but that had been an exceedingly low bar to get over. They certainly weren't the equal of little Raf. Which bespoke poorly of them in general, come to think of it, if they were so easily out-shined by a mere adolescent.

Although, in all fairness, their work had been more than sufficient so far. Perhaps it was less that they were dull—although Ratchet wasn't prepared to rule it out, given how much they gaped at everything, even after weeks of experience—but that Raf was simply exceptional. If he had been Cybertronian, Ratchet was sure that he would have made a first-class orderly, if not an apprentice under the likes of Pharma or even Ratchet himself.

Perhaps that was why he was indulging the bright little thing now; by letting him expend energy on an old project Ratchet had inherited from Perceptor. Hard light holoforms had been deemed too expensive resource-wise to implement when they had first been discussed; even now, Ratchet still wouldn't be able to justify installing them unless their energon consumption was less than half that of Ratchet's own short-range scanners.

Still, he had promised Raf—for reasons that were still beyond his own comprehension—that if he could make realistic avatars using generators within the given margin, he'd let the child participate in their installation.

“Pre-programmed choices,” Ratchet eyed the wire diagram on the screen suspiciously. It didn't look very human-like.
“Sure.” Raf tapped the keys, bringing up the code for Ratchet to look over. “There's a programmed 'wardrobe' people can chose from to personalize their holograms. I got a little help, but if everyone's okay with hats until I figure out how to get the hair to look right...”

“Hmph. Bring up the energon strain?” Ratchet surveyed the results, and blinked. It was nearly within the accepted margin. “That can hardly be right.”

Raf shrugged, and tapped the screen, bringing up a different display. The hard data corroborated it. “The range was the hardest part. Since it’s, y’know, hard light? I thought we could embed like, Bluetooth transmitters or something in just a tiny amount of hard light, and let the transmitters do most of the work.”

“And what will these chargers use for power, exactly?”

“Solar.” Raf dug in his pocket, and held something black and small. “I thought we could maybe modify phone chargers...?”

“No.” Ratchet cursed himself for hurrying on at the crestfallen look on the little parasite's faceplate. “I shall find something that can carry a larger charge among our own stores. This is excellent work, Rafael.”

Raf bared his teeth, shimmying as though he was getting ready to pounce on something. “Really? Thank you!”

Belatedly, Ratchet switched the body language aid on his HUD from the setting for domestic cats back to humans. He’d come across a feral one on patrol, and had had to transform to avoid smearing it and its litter on his tires.

Oh. The little thing was pleased; apparently both with Ratchet and with himself. Quaint.

“Yes, yes, yes.” Ratchet moved it from his leg to the floor with a quiet vent of relief. “Now, if we want this done in time for the next software update, you had better follow me down to general storage.”

Raf trotted obediently along beside him. “Hey, Ratchet? Can I ask you something?”

“I have faith that you will, regardless of my say on the matter.”

“You know Jack's neighbor's name, right?”

“Of course I...” Ratchet's internal search came up blank. He didn't care to focus on them for any length of time longer than necessary, in all honesty. Once it had been ascertained that they would continue to be an asset, despite their brief absence, Ratchet had moved on to more important things. “Hmm. No, I don't. Why, what is it?”

Raf shrugged. “You gotta ask them.”

“Excuse me?” Of all the impertinent...!

“If you're rude enough to forget, you have to be rude enough to ask again.” Raf stared up at him, mushy little face earnest. “Esquivel house rule. That's what my tia says.”

“Your aunt is not someone to whom I must answer,” Ratchet scoffed.

“I am.” Raf jogged a few paces to keep up.
Ratchet vented as noisily and pointedly as he could. “Is it so terrible that I can't remember their name? This planet's full of humans.”

“You know my name. You know Miko and Jack's.”

“You all are different.” Ratchet snapped, a half-second before his processor caught up with his mouth. “Distinctive, I mean. In comparison to each other.”

“So're they.” Raf scrubbed a hand through his spiky hair—grooming, perhaps. “Look at it this way—if they hadn't said something, you'd still be using Windows.”

“Fair.” With a groan, Ratchet accessed the external comm connected to their phone number. What is your full name? “There! I sent them a text! Satisfied?”

“Uh-huh.” Raf patted at his ankle as it swept by, uncomfortably close. Ratchet watched his movements until he moved away again. Bumblebee would be miserable for joors if he accidentally kicked his novelty human across the hallway.

His comm pinged with an irritatingly simplistic message. Why??

“Hrmph.”

Raf glanced up at him from a nearby pile of machine scraps. “What's wrong?”

“They want to know why I'm asking.”

“Can't you just tell them?” Raf asked.

Absolutely not. “I don't see why it matters.”

“Uh-huh. Does this look good?” He held up a piece of scrap for Ratchet's inspection.

“That's a spare battery for the spacebridge, so no. Try that pile over there, it's lower grade equipment.”

“Yes, Ratchet.”

“And don't touch anything glowing, it's too late in the evening to have to set up the decontamination shower.”

“Yes, Ratchet.”

The external comm pinged with an abbreviated name. Can't you just call me that? Everyone else does.

Ratchet sent back a terse terms accepted glyph and hurried after Raf. “Don't try to lift that, it out-weighs you by an order of magnitude!”

“Sorry, Ratchet.” Raf stepped back, rubbing his arms.

Almost absently, he saved the preferred name in his database.

Chapter End Notes
Ratchet: That boy would have done well at the Academy, I dare say. Why, Pharma would have made an excellent teacher--
Optimus: No. No, he wouldn't have.
Ratchet: so he was a bit rough around the edges...
Optimus, having flashbacks to dealing with Ratchet's creep of an ambiguous ex: Old friend, you are 'rough around the edges'. Pharma's faults can be summarily described in counts of malpractice.
Hynek Scale

Chapter Summary

In ufology, the Hynek scale is used to categorize contact with UFOs; also known as the 'close encounter' scale. Although J. Allen Hynek proposed a three-point system, others have added more levels on, although none beyond the first three are standardized. Close encounters of the first kind are defined as sightings of unidentified flying objects, seeming less than 500 feet away, that show appreciable angle extension and discernible detail.

Close encounters of the second kind are defined as encounters where a physical effect attributed to the UFO can be discerned; although what exactly this means changes with measure to measure, which demonstrates one of the flaws of this scale. A second encounter can include anything from crop circles to physical effects on the observer.

Close encounters of the third kind include any encounter where a seemingly animated creature is present. Obviously, this includes aliens; but also humans, robots, or anything else that appears to be associated directly with the UFO.

Chapter Notes

First of all: thank you to everyone who has commented, kudos'd, or just given this story a whirl! You folks are very sweet, and it's always lovely to hear from you. Whether you've left heartfelt congrats, an articulate essay, even just a single lowercase sentence before disappearing, Batman-like, into the night, it's awesome hearing what you have to say.

And if you're someone for whom kudos and comments aren't your tea, that's okay too! Hits numbers are, I assure you, Also Very Good.

Additionally, some outlining news: I know what I'm doing! That's a lie, actually; but my notes are organized, the plot lines are planned, and the cheat sheet looks has more cross-references than your average Tolkien novel. This fic might...take a while.

And finally, one more thanks to Bertie for pointing out a significant typo in a previous chapter. It's not enough to warrant going back and looking for it, but if you remember a word being spelled wrong that's now better, it's all good.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The fact that it was not the first base-shuddering crash you had heard on the premises was not reassuring. The fact that it was even louder than the first one was even less so.

You pushed yourself into a kneeling position on Bumblebee's palm, heart pounding, trying not to stare at the hard cement floor below you. Had it not been for Bumblebee's quick reflexes, that floor would've been a dent in your head. That catwalk really needed better supports. “Please tell me that wasn't another wall.” You said numbly.

“Unfortunately not,” Ratchet snapped, fingers dancing across the console. Bulkhead and Arcee hurried over, humming subtly. Their weaponry systems still folded up, hidden under metal plating;
but ready to snap into place at the slightest provocation.

Your attention flicked back to Ratchet as he made a noise of surprise. “An unidentified Autobot craft just materialized halfway through the top of the mesa. Bad space bridge coordinates, from the looks of things.” He sniffed. “In broad daylight, no less.”

“Craft?” Jack asked, rubbing the back of his head where it had hit the railing. “As in, like, space ship?”

“A small one,” Ratchet muttered, peering at the screen with an ugly scowl. “Not an Autobot make, looks largely contrived…”

“Sorry,” you said blankly. “But a literal space ship. Containing more aliens.”

“Dude, what's your problem?” Miko picked herself up off the grating. Raf, still placidly seated on the sofa, offered her a hand. “You've already gotten the first contact treatment.”

“Aliens will never stop being cool, on principle,” you told her solemnly. Bee chirped, apparently flattered.

“Have you ever seen the movie Independence Day?” Jack asked. Raf kicked at him.

“Can that even happen?” Arcee asked, ignoring your little sidebar. “Take a 'bridge and get stuck halfway through a solid object?”

“Oh, yeah,” Bulkhead rumbled sagely, peering at the display over Ratchet's shoulder. “Built a couple bridging stations back on Cybertron, back in the day. There was a reason they didn't let us breakers 'n shakers anywhere near the navigation rooms once the walls were up, y'know. You wanna let the best of the craziest and the craziest of the best handle those things, trust me.”

“Eesh.” Jack muttered, eyeing the dark circle of the groundbridge warily. Bee chattered in what sounded like agreement.

Optimus strode into the room in a ridiculously regal power walk, as grave as ever. It was a talent. “Hail them.”

“Hail?” Ratchet scoffed, even as he turned back to the monitor, fingers tapping. “Might as well shout up the elevator shaft, you'd get better audio…Autobot Outpost Omega One to unidentified vessel! You have violated interplanetary space bridge safety protocol! Do you read us?”

The line crackled for a long moment. Bee put you down, belatedly. You shot him a quick thumb's up.

The comm spat a heavy burst of static, resolving painfully slowly into words. “--‘D ask you to specify which protocol, control,” it said. “But I'm guessing the answer to that'd be 'all of them'. Repeat, this is the Autobot vessel Jackhammer, requesting permission to, uh. Land.”

Bulkhead's bottom-heavy jaw swung open. “Jackie?”

“'Jackie'?” Miko asked, jumping up to perch on the flat of Bulkhead's foot.

“Bulk?” The static cleared a little. “Ha! Hey, Bulkhead! Check out what piece of scrap I got running!”

“Stand by.” Optimus held up a hand. Ratchet cut the connection. “Can you identify this individual?”
Bee twittered above you, stepping up to nudge Bulkhead in the side. He chuckled dolefully.

“Identify him? I'd know that ozone smell anywhere, sir. Wheeljack, science division liaison and chief detonation specialist for the Wreckers.”

“Detonation specialist? That anything like a ballistics expert?” You asked.

“Oh.” He looked shifty. “Maybe less concerned with the 'safety' bit, more concerned with the 'bigger boom' part.”

“Delightful.” Ratchet said, glaring at the screen.

“Any idea why his ship is halfway through the helipad?” Arcee muttered.

Bulkhead shrugged.

“Okay,” you said, trying not to sound impatient. You felt a little jittery, thanking of something that large—and it had to be large—out there in the middle of the desert. “But it can’t stay there, right? Someone's gonna see the freakin' flying saucer sticking out of the roof. Has Fowler been let know he needs the roads closed?”

“Agent Fowler cannot mobilize workers on such short notice,” Optimus turned back to the console. “Open the line again. Wheeljack, your current position is not feasible. Are you able to move your craft?”

“Uh.” Something crackled in the background. “Don't suppose someone could pop down and set up a signal transmitter in your landing bay'r something?”

“Would my phone work?” Miko held it up.

Ratchet squinted at her suspiciously, apparently wary of any attempt on her part to be helpful without motivation. “If it has a cellular antenna, then yes.”

Miko took off like a shot.

“A small contingent will be waiting to greet you,” Optimus said. Bulkhead perked up.

“Roger. Jackhammer out.” The line went dead.

“Make sure you get well clear!” Arcee called after Miko. “In fact, come right back!”

“Mama bear.” Ratchet scoffed.

“This from you.” She leaned on a hip, amused. Bulkhead patted her gingerly on the back before following Bumblebee and Optimus out. His hand dwarfed the span of her shoulders.

“You aren't useful.” Ratchet tapped at the console with more force then strictly necessary. “Go be somewhere else.”

“Can we see the spaceship land?” Raf asked.

“Before Optimus and Bulkhead verify it? No.” Arcee held out a hand for him to climb into, handling him like a baby bird. “Once we've made sure it really is Bulkhead's pal, and that his ship isn't dripping with radiation or whatever? We'll see.”

“Oh, c'mon. Miko gets to see it,” Jack said. He slid down the catwalk ladder with sixteen-year-old ease. You followed him at a pace more fitting for someone aware of their own mortality. Stupid
Miko stomped back through the doorway with a huff. “So unfair. They're treating us like--”

“Civilians.” You crossed your arms. “Who're on thin ice already, if you recall.”

Everyone except you and Ratchet avoided each other’s eyes for a moment, remembering the week of dressing-downs and disappointed glances that had followed the Racing Incident.

“Arcee, comms.” Ratchet stretched, with a *whirr* noise. “I suppose if this fellow is as bad as Bulkhead says, I'll need the medbay ready for machine shop injuries. Fragging Wreckers.”

Arcee took his place at the control panel, and Ratchet stomped off, muttering under his breath.

After a few moments, Arcee's shoulders let go of a little tension as the signal came through. “Okay, it's him. Ratchet's putting him and the ship through decontamination, and then you can go meet him.”

Miko pumped a fist. “Alright! I bet he's gonna be, like, a super-soldier.”

“Like Captain America?” Raf asked.

“Or the Winter Soldier,” Jack muttered.


“I can think of no higher praise for a scientist,” you said, grimacing.

Arcee huffed at you, grinning. “Know a lot of scientists, do you?”

“My gran worked at NASA,” you told her. “And my mom was a pharmacist. I might be a bumpkin with a telescope, but I've been in enough labs to know that 'volatile' is usually a warning label, not a desired character trait.”

She shrugged. “Fair. You want to head down? He'll probably be clean by the time you reach the hold.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Miko grabbed Jack by the back of the collar and dragged him down the stairs, grabbing your wrist in a vice grip on the way past. “Come on, come on, *why are you all so slow.*”

You weren't sure how much sugar Miko had had today, but you decided the answer was 'enough'.

...Not that it wouldn't have been an oddity otherwise. Wow, this really was your life, huh?

The thing was *huge*. There seemed to be a sizable chunk missing from one side; but it still dwarfed even the Autobots standing by it's nearer end. You could've probably fit a small gas station inside, if you were clever about it.
Miko raced in, letting go of you and Jack in order to scale up Bulkhead's ankle like a pushy kitten. He, Optimus, and the newcomer had been chatting in a loose triangle; but at her entrance, their attention turned to her. The newcomer recoiled slightly, tensing up.

“Hi!” Miko called, dangling from Bulkhead's calf like a monkey. “I'm Miko! Who the frag're you?”

“Miko, Jesus.” Jack pulled her back down. You followed at a brisk jog.

“Well, well, well.” The newcomer braced his hands on his knees, leaning down to see. He had a broad, angular head, with a wide flat shape that out you in mind of an opened book. His face was traced with faint lines that took you a moment to recognize as scars. “This the local flavor, Bulk’? Kinda look like us.”

You watched him warily. There was something sort of...crackling around him. He didn't not move like the others, but there was a subtle sort of skittering to his movements nonetheless. Something deep in your brain rebeled, like you were looking at an optical illusion. He was fast for someone the size of an RV.

Bulkhead scooped Miko up. “Wheeljack, Miko. Miko, Wheeljack. She's the alien I was tellin' you about, 'Jack.”

“Oh, that's gonna get old fast,” muttered Jack the human.

Miko beamed at having been mentioned off the bat, sprawling carelessly in Bulkhead's palm like she was used to it. (You were having a heart attack, watching her swing her feet over a fifteen-foot-drop like it was nothing, but okay then.) “What do you turn into? Are you as cool as Bulkhead? How many 'Cons have you slagged?”

“Miko,” Optimus said, gently.

She gathered herself into a more stable position in Bulkhead's palm, grinning irrepressibly. “Sorry.”

“Aw, I see why you like her,” Wheeljack said grinning. “Hey there, little guy.” He crouched down to her eye level in Bulkhead's hand, flicking his fingers at her indulgently.

Optimus shifted, subtly. You wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't been watching him, but he looked a little on edge.

“Yeah, Miko's great,” Bulkhead said proudly, oblivious. “Wait'll you hear what she did the first time she snuck out on a mission--”

“Can't wait for it.” Wheeljack punched his shoulder, grinning fondly. Bulkhead swayed a little in place, other hand coming underneath to spot Miko.

Wheeljack turned back to Optimus. “Other than the local fauna, what's the scoop around here?”

“We will debrief you on the current state of affairs in due time,” Optimus promised. “For now, make your introductions to the rest of the team. I believe our chief medical officer will wish to speak with you in short notice.”

Wheeljack's brow quirked. “Uh, no offense, but I'm not looking for a permanent posting. I don't need to know the names of the entire base.”

“It's a small force,” Bulkhead assured him. “Come on, they're gonna love you!”
“Alright, if you're gonna twist my arm.” Wheeljack stepped over you and Jack, heading towards the doorway.

“Uh,” said Jack, a little offended. “Hey, there.”


He shot you an unreadable look, eyes flickering to Bulkhead. “Do they want, like, food, or…?”

You heard Optimus take a breath to speak. Hastily, you stepped forward. As much as you appreciated Optimus' 'protectors of the Earth' routine, he wasn't helping humanity's street cred by holding your hands like an anxious parent on the first day of kindergarten. “A friendly greeting'll do. Welcome to Earth.” You introduced yourself.

“Jack Darby.” Jack awkwardly sort of put his hand out, as though Wheeljack was going to shake it.

“Huh.” Wheeljack seemed a little bemused. After a second, he reached down to carefully lay a fingertip flush with Jack's palm. It would've been a decent attempt at a handshake, if he'd gone up and down rather than side to side. “Less 'exotic pets' and more 'diminutive political allies', then.”

“Yeah,” Jack shrugged. “We help out some.”

“Jack and Bee totally snuck out the other night,” Miko hollered from Bulkhead's hand, like the force of chaos she was. Bulkhead clapped a hand over her like a lid.

“Uhh,” said Jack.

Wheeljack's sheepish smile curled into a grin, “Sounds like quite the story. If you can get a rulebook like the Scout to have a little fun, you can't be all bad.”

Jack shot him a suitably suspicious look.

Optimus looked on with the air of a principal watching his students casually discussing smoking weed on school grounds in the middle of his office. Bulkhead shot him a nervous look. “Uh. Yeah, they're really something. Come on, I bet you'll like our chief medical officer!” He started half-shepherding Wheeljack out the door. As he passed, he set Miko down next to you and Jack. She beamed at him, the picture of innocence. Bulkhead shot her a deeply distrustful look.

Miko smiled back. When they were gone, the edges her mouth twisted into a rictus of a grin, and she doubled over, cackling.

“What?” Jack looked as though he was wondering if she was explosive.

“It's--” she snickered, hands on her knees. “Sorry, but, like, Bulk's kinda bad at doing that thing grownups, do, like, trying to move things along so kids don't act crazy? 'Cuz I'm sorry, but how long d'you think it's gonna be until Ratchet and new guy hate each other?”

Above you, you heard the barest mechanical hiss of air as Optimus sighed.

…

You had grown...fond was a very strong term. You were tolerant of Ratchet. While he was still volatile, bitter, and a little too prone to slamming things around when he was angry—a common occurrence—to endear him very much to you, there was a trace of a silver lining around his absolute rain cloud of a personality. He was precise, competent, and refreshingly safety-oriented when he
thought of it; and his particular brand of bedside manners brought to mind an old, crotchety but well-meaning bachelor uncle who had fallen out of practice with people. You didn't like him by any stretch of the word; but he was good people. He possessed the personality equivalent of a cinnamon cough drop.

So there was a hint of compassion mixed with the schadenfreude you felt as you watched Wheeljack systematically push every single one of the old grump's buttons.

A hint, anyway. He was still an intolerable grouch.

“So,” Wheeljack was saying, drawing the word out. “I can tell you again, if you want. Though I'm assuming you're not gonna like the explanation any better the second time.”

“If you want to actually tell me, and not a load of exorbitant technobabble?” Ratchet made an ugly, multi-tonal beeping noise. “By all means. However, if not…”

“I really don't know why it's so hard to believe,” Wheeljack remarked.

“Hard to—” He sputtered.

You couldn't help but notice that no one else was stepping in, either. Raf and Miko were on either side of you, watching the goings-on like a tennis match. Arcee and Jack were hovering in the doorway, whispering back and forth like gossiping children as Bee listened in.

Bulkhead and Optimus were in a video conference with Agent Fowler, presumably in an effort to convince him that this newcomer was only a loose cannon up until it affected American interests; and that his superiors had absolutely nothing to worry about. Although you couldn't say one way or another for Optimus, you knew for a fact Bulkhead wasn't that good at lying. That would've been a fun conversation to sit in on.

Not that you were complaining here, either. “You expect me to stand here and believe you broke the Law of Wormholes in an outdated tank like this. In the middle of a firefight.” Ratchet snorted, as though nothing could have been more preposterous.

“First of all,” Wheeljack drawled. He had just gotten here, there was no earthly reason for him to have such a strong Midwestern accent, what the heck. “I don't appreciate you calling the ol’ girl an 'outdated tank'.” He thumped the outer hull affectionately. It—it wasn't. Was it? Was the spaceship alive, too? Was that more or less strange than the idea of cars driving in other, larger cars?

“Furthermore,” Wheeljack took a deep breath, as though bracing himself. “If you wanna split hairs, it was Brainstorm.”

The energy in the room changed so fast, you could almost feel the air move. Out of the corner of your eye, you watched Bee edging away from the spacecraft.

“So,” Ratchet said, much too calmly. “You mean to say. That you used an untested prototype of Brainstorm’s. In uncontrolled conditions. In the heart of Praxus.”

“That's about it,” Wheeljack said.

There was a moment of silence.

“Hands over your ears,” Raf hissed sharply, clapping his own over his head. You complied, mystified. Miko snapped her headphones on, shooting him a weird look.
Ratchet screeched, a long, high, howling note that sank into the marrow of your bones and writhed. If you were to torture an old rotary telephone, it would have sounded like that. It was weaponized static; it was a glass violin being tuned; it was bad on a primally fundamental level you hadn't experienced since you had last broken a bone. Out of the corner of your eye, Jack doubled over, swearing. Arcee scooped him up, putting her body between him and Ratchet.

There was a gentle tug on your sleeve. 'Cybertronian,' Raf mouthed. You thought that was it, anyway—it was a difficult word to make out even in the best of conditions. You took every nice thing you had ever thought about Ratchet back, as he railed on and on and on.

Bumblebee shrieked over him, a single high note piercing through the blanket of eldritch static. Ratchet cut off abruptly, looking around as though he had forgotten he had an audience.

Bee gestured at the humans. Miko picked her head up from where she'd attempted to bury it in your sweater. “I think I just got tinnitus,” she said dazedly. “But like, crazy space tinnitus.”

“I...” Ratchet looked mortally embarrassed. “Don't repeat any of that!” He snapped, flustered, and stormed out.

“Y'know, I kind of like it here,” Wheeljack said.

“I heard that!” A door slammed somewhere down the hall.

Optimus and Bulkhead skidded to a stop in the doorway, transforming on a dime. “Autobots, report.”

“Wheeljack set off a Brainstorm original in Iacon,” Arcee said immediately. “Untested and everything.”

Optimus' heavy eyebrows shot up. Bulkhead's entire body jerked backwards, eyes wide.

“Tattle much?” Jack caught himself on his feet as Arcee set him down.

“You don't know Brainstorm,” Bulkhead said uneasily. “No one messes around with Brainstorm's stuff. Including Brainstorm.”

“You will file a complete report with Ratchet,” Optimus said, brooking no arguments. “And undergo a class 4 decontamination, if you would. Bulkhead, Bumblebee and I will undergo class 3. You four will accompany us.”

It was telling, in a way, that no one gave even a token complaint about extra baths. This Brainstorm guy was serious business, apparently.

Chapter End Notes

For the record: yes, Ratchet did swear in front of the aliens. He's mortified.

Elsewhere:
Makeshift:...I can't help but think I'm supposed to be doing something.
**Accretion**

Chapter Summary

Accretion is the process by which smaller bodies are drawn together to form larger bodies. For example, planetesimals attract and stick to each other through gravity, forming planets. This is the process that, over large periods of time, forms planets, stars, and, eventually, entire galaxies.

Chapter Notes

Happy Super Bowl Sunday!

Bit darker chapter this week. Nothing too graphic--although if anyone thinks something should be tagged, please let me know--but if vague discussions of war aren't your cup of tea, tread carefully.

Thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“First off, in my defense,” said Wheeljack. “It was this or the scrapheap. Let me walk you through it.”

The Jackhammer--although a veritable cathedral in comparison the likes of you, Miko, and Raf—was straining to contain the combined mass of Wheeljack, Ratchet and Bulkhead. Optimus had taken one carefully neutral look at the door, which hit at about chin-level on him, and summarily excused himself. You could hardly blame him.

Ratchet knelt by the mass of wires and arcane-looking electrical parts, frowning. “Please do. Half of these parts look like…”

“They came from a morgue?” Wheeljack started unplugging the thing from the wall. “Yeah. Like I said, do or die.”

You winced. Ratchet nodded soberly. “Fair enough. I can certainly understand why the front would have been working on something like this. Spacebridges,” he added, mostly for Raf’s benefit. “Come with serious drawbacks. Recall that they rely on communication with a fixed central hub to coordinate travelers. If either the comm line or the bridging platform itself is compromised, any agents in the field are stranded at best or captured at worst.” He grimaced. “Not to mention the hurdles involved trying to navigate through deep space.”

Something was niggling at you about that, but you brushed it off. You could ask questions later; preferably not in a room with—judging by the way Bulkhead had looked at the thing—an experimental device made at least partly out of alien corpses. You tore your gaze away from the thing with an effort. You enjoyed the Pacific Rim aesthetic as much as the next geek, but...ugh.

“Yup,” Wheeljack said, patting it affectionately. “With this baby, you just trace a the homing signal, and boom. Instant interstellar travel. We never finished the navigational matrix, so there was—uhh—
some complications en route. Luckily, I picked up that little invite your Prime sent out.”

“And we're more'n happy you're here,” Bulkhead said. “Although, uh. Still don't get why Brainstorm was working on bridging tech. He has a background in pretty much everything else, but I remember him as being pretty leery of this stuff. Something about lessons learned?”

“Well, you know,” Wheeljack yanked on a stubborn plug, head bent over his work. “Needs must; you know how it is, Bulk'. It's all hands on deck when the scrap hits the smelter. That's just how it goes.”

“Fine,” Ratchet said, slowly. “Except Bulkhead also mentioned that you worked mainly with explosives. That's the opposite of what we're going for with spacebridge technology, generally.”

You shifted, uneasy. Bulkhead was staring at the back of Wheeljack's head like his own obituary was written there. Ratchet just seemed...wrong. The familiar, ever-present flicker of irritation was fading from his face, replaced by something sleek and cold and utterly calm. You had caught a glimpse of that expression on June's face, once; when you had caught her in the middle of an emergency at the clinic.

Wheeljack took a moment to respond. “Guess we're doing this now, huh,” he muttered. “Okay. Alrighty.”

He stood with a groan, leaving the machine half-unplugged from the wall. His arms raised in a slow, languid stretch, working out the kinks that had set in from hours of grasping the controls.

Ratchet sighed pointedly. “Sometime today, perhaps.”

“Ratchet,” Bulkhead said, softly. His eyes were fastened on Wheeljack.

When he finally turned to face the rest of you, Wheeljack's face was expressionless. “You're gonna want to get Prime back in here. And tell him to bring the rest of the authorized personnel. We're debriefing.”

“That's hardly protocol—”

“Ratchet,” Bulkhead said tightly. He seemed frozen in place, staring at Wheeljack; but his eyes were focusing and re-focusing rapidly.

“Yeah.” Wheeljack turned to start down the boarding ramp, leaving the machine where it was. “Story time's in session, kiddies. I'm not telling it more than once.”

…

Afterwards, you wouldn't remember exactly what Wheeljack said. You wouldn't remember how Arcee reacted, or the expression of Bee's face; or whether anyone interrupted or not. While Wheeljack was speaking, the information he carried lingered in the room, muffling the ambient noises of the base, filling the empty space like white noise.

The one thing you would remember was the eyes. You didn't think you would ever forget Wheeljack's eyes.

One of the last sizable Autobot strongholds—the last city still active on Cybertron, full stop—had been wiped out. According the Wheeljack's report, dwindling resources had forced them to disperse, following intelligence rumoring a surviving Cybertronian colony on a nearby exomoon. Before the shuttles could be fully boarded, however, they had been attacked.
Casualties were projected at a little over three fifths of the city's total population. The area was too irradiated for them to confirm an exact number.

Praxus had fallen. Cybertron was, officially, a dead planet.

The base, for the first time since you had arrived there, was silent.

You had volunteered to man the comms. Ratchet had shuffled off to the medbay, eyes bleak. You could hear him a room over, picking things up and setting them down, over and over. Arcee had torn out of the base without a word to anyone; although her signal traced the route she would have taken for patrol. Jack had taken the elevator up to the roof to wait for her.

Bulkhead and Wheeljack had headed off into the bowels of the base, all but leaning on each other. Miko was cradled in one careful hand.

Optimus had taken up post at the auxiliary console, running computer simulations. You had picked up enough of the Cybertronian alphabet to recognize numbers, repeating themselves over and over again. You wondered what they told him. You wondered how much of your friends' home would be left.

Mostly, though—and perhaps this spoke poorly of you—

You were pissed.

You were an adult. You knew the world sucked sometimes; that it was full of good people who deserved better than they got, and bad people who dodged consequences like wiffle balls. Still, there was a tiny, outraged voice in your head that wouldn't shut up; that railed about how kind the Autobots were, how much they had already lost. They were odd and strange and welcoming and absolutely shit at lying; and the idea of this new horror settling along with the ones already hanging over them made your blood boil. They didn't fucking deserve this shit.

Fuck.

You uncurled your hands from the console edge, one finger at a time. Your knuckles creaked from strain. For a moment, you stared at the soft, curving lines of your hands. There were faint callouses and patches of dead skin on the palms, the faintest trace of a farmer's tan from Nevada's sun coloring the backs. You had never felt so fragile before.

You let your hand fall back into your lap. This was a war of literal titans. You could barely throw a punch, let alone fight in--in--intergalactic battles, or whatever.

That didn't mean you didn't want to.

Except...this wasn't about you. You were not the protagonist of this story; you were barely even a supporting character. This wasn't about what you wanted. It was about what you could do.

“Optimus?” you called. He stilled, eyes lingering on the screen. He said nothing.

“Did...you happen to see where Bee and Raf went?”

“...No.” Optimus said finally. He looked up, finally, eyes fathomless. “I...cannot go after him,” he murmured, almost to himself.

You thought you understood what he meant. “Can you keep an eye on the comms?”
“Yes.” He cleared the auxiliary console's screen with a flick.

“And, uh. How can—let me know?” His eyes fastened on yours. You hastened to clarify, stumbling over your words. “How I can help, that is. Don't hesitate to ask.”

You thought his expression might have softened a fraction. “See to the others. I will be here.”

“Yeah,” you said, voice catching. “I know you will.”

You left before you could cry in front of him.

…

You had to stop in the middle of the hallway to wipe your eyes. Then you did the rounds.

You paused by the medbay doors, which were, for the first time, closed. Your first instinct was to go in--except that Ratchet barely tolerated people under the best of circumstances. You would have hesitated to bother him even if you were a favorite of his; which you were not.

After a moment, you ran back to get a cube of energon out of storage—there was a human-sized cart in the corner, expressly for that purpose—and rolled it over to the door. You rapped at the door, your little fist barely making a sound in the large hall. The sounds of movement inside stopped. Seconds ticked past.

With a sigh, you started back down the hall, leaving the cart where it was. Behind you, you thought you heard the sound of a door sliding open; but you didn't look, and no one spoke. When you turned the corner, you glanced back down the hall. The cart was now empty.

You found Bulkhead and Wheeljack sitting on the boarding ramp of the Jackhammer, Miko perched on Wheeljack's knee. They didn't stop talking quietly as you paused in the doorway, but Miko looked up to shoot you a thumb's up.

You trusted her judgement in this. She was the resident Wrecker expert, as it were.

You had to go out of your way to find Jack; but at least it wasn't hard. When you reached the top of the mesa, he was perched in one of the many plastic garden chairs Fowler had stored up there for some eldritch reason, scrolling through his phone like nothing had happened.

You jogged over to crouch at his side, leaving a little extra space between you. You politely ignored the puffiness around his eyes. “Hey. You good?”

Jack shrugged, without looking at you. “Not, you know, really. But I'm okay.” His eyes flickered to the horizon. “You should go inside. She's not going to want an audience when she comes back.”

“Gotcha.” you stood up. “You have my cell, right? Text me whenever. Same goes for Arcee.”

He rolled his eyes, a little halfheartedly, but his lips weren't drawn in a frown too old for his face, so you'd call that a win. “C'mon. What're you, team mom?”

“I'm deputy mom, under June. Optimus or Fowler'd be team mom.” You pressed a hand to his shoulder, briefly. “Let her know, though.”

“Yeah.” Jack put his phone away and rested his arms on his knees, staring out over the desert. “Okay.”

It took some doing to find Bee and Raf. They had made a nest in one of the spare storage rooms out
of a collection of tarps and crates, like a blanket fort. If it weren't for the faint blue glow of Bumblebee's eyes, you might've missed them entirely.

At the sound of your footsteps, Raf poked his head out. You stopped, watching for cues. He held up a finger, popping his head back in to confer with Bee.

After a moment, a tiny arm extricated itself from the tarps to wave you over. You lifted the flap and stuck your head in.

Bumblebee was curled in on himself, arms tucked over his torso to cradle Raf, who was laying on his chest. The flat of one large finger was absently stroking back and forth over his spiky hair, fuzzing it with static electricity. Despite the fact that he towered above you--particularly at this angle--he looked like a little kid, nestled in a corner.

“Guys?” you whispered.

Raf raised his head to give you an indescribably weary look. Bee chirped, weakly, and offered you a hand. For once, you stepped on without hesitating, and let him gather you upon his chest, hands cupping as though he was trying to soak in your warmth.

The three of you stayed like that for a very long time.

Bee only stirred when it was time for patrol. Even then, he transformed so that you and Raf could ride in his cab.

According to your phone, it was getting towards sun down. Ratchet had indeed emerged from the medbay; and although he was still terse and raspy, he spared a moment to greet Bee, and to make sure Raf was safely situated on the console nearby. He ignored you; but then, he ignored you most of the time. It was just good to see him out and with the rest of the group.

All of the Autobots seemed a little clingier than usual. Normally, no one picked you up; a silent-yet-mutual arrangement that had saved everyone a lot of grief. Now, though, all the humans were on cuddle duty. Miko was perched on Bulkhead's arm, tucked close to his torso. Jack was still on the roof—you had checked up on him again. Bee had you and Raf; but he passed Raf to Ratchet with little fanfare. You waited to be set on your customary perch, the catwalk; but when Bee settled against the wall, you were still cradled in his hands. Fair enough. You could get down if you needed.

Dully, you realized you weren't worried about being dropped. Fancy that.

Everyone was sort of loosely clustered in the main room, Wheeljack at the center. The teleportation thing—no one had used the word yet, but hello—was sitting in the middle of the floor, in several pieces.

Bulkhead set her down, and Miko ventured closer to poke at some eldritch part of the contraption that, for some ungodly reason, was emitting the faintest glow. Wheeljack slid her away automatically, like she was a cat trying to climb on a keyboard. “So, the navigational board got fried. But the Bridgeless Spacebridge--”

“We're not calling it that,” Ratchet snapped tiredly.

“Too late, Brainstorm's got the patent already.” Wheeljack said, bracingly. He seemed to be intent on summoning a cavalierly good mood through sheer force of will. “He wanted a name with 'BS' initials, don't ask me why. But I was lucky enough to catch the transmission you folks sent from the
Matrix—big M—from where it stuck me.” He flashed a grin. “At the edge of the Black.”

“The Black?” Bulkhead crossed his arms. Miko edged closer to the Bridgeless Spacebridge again; and he uncrossed them in order to pick her up again. “No way.”

“Way. And I've got the logs to prove it. Wheeljack stood, stretching. “Trust me. If we can get this baby up and running? It'll change the tide of the war. Instantaneous space travel, the pocket edition.”


Bulkhead brought up to face height to explain, voice lowering. You didn't catch the rest.

“We will discuss the continued development of your project once your craft had been repaired,” Optimus said from his place at the comms console. “For now, today had held enough revelations. As soon as Arcee is back, Bumblebee, you will take the local patrol. You will escort our young friends home, as well.”

“I can take Miko,” Bulkhead said. “And Arcee's gonna want Jack back safe.”

Everyone glanced at you.

“Uh,” you shifted in Bee's hand, uncomfortable. “Figured I might walk, for once?”

“Ratchet will escort you,” Optimus said, brooking no arguments. “In the meantime, Wheeljack. I would appreciate it if you joined me in a conference call with the local government. Our liaison will be arriving late; but I would rather he be briefed as soon as possible.”

Chapter End Notes

Humans are generally unknown throughout the galactic community; but those who do know of them find their most notable trait to be their exceedingly cuddly properties.
Satellite

Chapter Summary

A satellite is defined as any body orbiting within an object's gravitational pull. Although the term usually refers to man-made devices, a planet around a sun, a moon around a planet, or a solar system around a galaxy also apply.

Chapter Notes

Happy double digits, folks! Once again, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I have a question.”

You blinked, startled out of your reverie. The combination of stark silence and the monotonous landscape outside must have lulled you into a light doze. You glanced warily at Ratchet's dashboard, mostly for want of anywhere else to look. “Uh. Okay?”

Ratchet took his sweet time about answering. The drive from the base to your house wasn't that long; although you knew from ventures with Bulkhead and Arcee that there were longer routes they could take if they wanted a private word with you. Ratchet had never utilized them with you before now, but he did tonight. A little foreboding; although to be fair, you couldn't actually recall if you had ever ridden with Ratchet before. Perhaps you were reading into it too much.

Still, Ratchet actively seeking to prolong time spent in your company was a subversion of the natural order in its own right.

“I’m sure you’ve picked up on my general distaste for your planet,” Ratchet said, finally. “I’ve certainly made no secret of it. It's barely hospitable to the species that evolved here, much less my own kind.”

“It's really that bad?”

Ratchet snorted. “Let me put it this way. There is a data packet floating around the Autobot frequencies, containing information as to how to conduct oneself on this miserable rock. Downloading that packet and implementing the new qualifications is the first order of business for entering a new atmosphere. The one for Earth includes everything from ventilation settings to behavioral norms. That's why Wheeljack could speak English right off the bat; and why he didn't immediately choke on the amount of sheer humidity in your air. If Wheeljack, in all his dubious wisdom, had decided to forgo implementation? He would have off-lined within five minutes of atmospheric seal breach.”

“Jesus.” You imagined a human walking off a ship as casually as Wheeljack had, trusting that the atmosphere would be within the margin to support them. You guessed you had sort of thought the Autobots were just...more versatile than humans, less fragile. Just because they could take a hit from
a fist the size of a refrigerator or sit on a car and crush it didn't mean they were invulnerable.

“Indeed,” Ratchet said drily. “So you'll forgive me for having my reservations about a planet that could *corrode limbs off*, if left to its own devices. But as disagreeable as Earth may be, Cybertron as it stands today is far, *far* worse.”

You closed your eyes, head swimming. You thought of the lovely, verdant New England forests you had grown up surrounded by, reduced to a skeletal shell. You thought of Jasper, empty buildings abandoned and baking under the relentless sun. Then you tried—and failed—to imagine the world that produced the Autobots. What would it have been like to have seen a place as incredible as Cybertron must have been in its death throws?

“I want to know,” Ratchet went on, doggedly. “If *you*, who flinches away from us at the *slightest* provocation—from *Optimus*, of all mechs—could ever imagine us *truly* settling here.”

You considered. “Are you being facetious, or do you want to know?”

“I don’t see why I need to limit myself.”

Cute. “...don't know, jeez. I know that if you need to, you'll make it work? I don't really know what to say. I know that even if worst comes to worst, there'll be people out there willing to help you. I know that—” Your voice broke. You cleared your throat. “--Home's people. Whatever else it is, it's always people. I dunno, I guess. I just hope.”

“And what do you hope for?”

“A happy ending?” You let your head rest against the window. “What else is there to hope for?”

“You're a font of optimism. I don't know why I ever asked.” Ratchet said bitterly. “Fine. While we're having this little tete a tete, I might as well ask. Why *are* you scared of Optimus?”

“Because he could realistically step on me at virtually any time? Because he outweighs my entire house?”

“*Now* who’s being facetious?”

“I don't know what you want from me.” You snapped. “It's my mushy animal brain, alright? Beg pardon for being *worried* about getting crushed by aliens who formally introduced themselves by crushing a truck I'd *been inside of* moments before.”

You rode in silence for a few minutes.

“I'm sorry.” You said, softly. “You didn't need that today.”

Ratchet stayed quiet.

“I'm not...I don’t want you to think I'm scared, exactly. Just nervous. I know you wouldn't hurt me on purpose.”

“Obviously, that confidence has its *limits.*” Ratchet said, icily.

You snorted, weary. “Confidence is one thing. Rationality is another. I don’t think I'm being unreasonable for being cautious.” You sighed. “I'm sorry. I don't want to have this conversation right now.”

“...Fine.”
It didn’t sound fine. “Ratchet?”

“What.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m not...as nervous around you.”

“...This is your road.” You glanced out the window. Sure enough, the cookie-cutter shapes of the Darby’s and the Nguyen’s houses were recognizable through the windshield. “Point out your address, I don’t have it on file.”

... Optimus did not relish his talks with Agent Fowler. Not because of any fault on the liaison’s part—on the contrary, Optimus had found himself growing fond of the man, with his dedication and his refreshingly frank attitude toward politics—but because they so rarely spoke about easily resolved problems.

Tonight was no exception.

“Look, I don’t know what you tell you,” Fowler said, sitting half-on the table. The gesture was done less out of a sense of ease as it was weariness, and Optimus regretted having brought this up so late in the day. By rights, the man should have gone to his house in Jasper to rest hours ago. There had scarcely been room for this earlier in the day, what with—newest developments; yet Optimus should have found the time. He should have kept his human friend from straining his faculties even further.

(At his core, Optimus was revoltingly selfish. He would take whatever help he could on his people’s behalf, even to the detriment of those around them.)

“You don’t want the kids legally on the team, sure,” Fowler continued. “Sure, alright, why not, makes complete sense. That’s sarcasm, by the way,” he added helpfully. “And I know why. No NDAs, minimal ties to your people if it all goes sour, et cetera. Bryce does not, and without his say-so I can’t approach civilians on classified matters unless I wanna retire to some nice federal prison on the dime of the boys upstairs. If it wasn’t for a very specific loophole,” the man paused to shoot Optimus a disgruntled look. “You wouldn’t even be able to keep the people you’ve already got. It’s just not happening.”

“As our war progresses, the risk to our companions grows by the day.” Optimus said, as gently as he could. “Our own investigations have told us that June Darby would be a valuable and trustworthy ally. Jack’s safety—”

“Is more or less on par with of the rest of Jasper, you over-sized Zamboni,” Fowler snarled. “At least, that’s the official story. Right?”

So terribly selfish. “…Indeed.”

Some of the belligerence left Fowler's little frame. He turned and braced himself on the table, leaning on his fists. “…Look. Best I can do is put in a recommendation to hire a civilian medic in a few months. If spending approves it, I can angle it so that she gets an offer. An offer, mind you.”

If Optimus was as wise as he pretended, he would send the children away. He knew the others did not understand how young they were, even for such a short-lived species. On Cybertron, the difference between ten and twenty years was pitiful. He wondered if Bumblebee knew Jack was, speaking relatively, only a handful of orns younger than he was; if Arcee knew that she and June Darby would have been of a single age.
But humans—adaptable, strange, unpredictable little things—changed from day to day and minute by minute, at once as volatile as a storm and as faithful as the seasons. The children were too young for this war, too *bright*—to allow them to come under fire was a violation of everything Optimus Prime had been meant to stand for.

But not, necessarily, everything Orion Pax had believed.

(Was that a weakness, or a strength? The Matrix hummed its senseless melodies, ancient and impartial as a star; and for all he could care, it was both.)

“Thank you, Agent,” Optimus said, trying not to let his inner turmoil color his speech. The man had done so much for them already; it would be worse than foolish or cruel to place blame on him now. “I would appreciate it.”

“Right.” Fowler stifled a yawn. “Ugh. That’s my cue for the night. Oh, one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“The astronomer.” Fowler shot him a Look. The human was very good at Looks, in a way that brought to mind Ratchet. Or, perhaps, Prowl. A human Prowl; wasn’t that an unpleasant thought? “They seemed pretty glum after everything shook out over that street racing thing.”

“They desired solitude.” Optimus smoothed the hint of a defensive edge out of his voice with effort. “They were shaken by the risks the children were being exposed to. I cannot say I fault them for it.”

“Oh huh. And the natural way to make sure kids are okay is to break contact with everyone. I’d ask you to do yourself a favor, big man, but that’s not really your thing.” Fowler fixed him with a sour stare. “Try to make a friend, huh? Pushing everyone away is a good way to wind up in a hug-myself coat.”

The words might have been... difficult to parse, but Optimus had heard similar sentiments from his advisers in the past. He had no doubt that he would continue to do so in the future. “I will take that under advisement. If there’s anything else, Agent Fowler?”

The human sighed. “I tried. ‘Night, big guy. Sleep tight.” Agent Fowler gathered his papers and trotted out the door, stifling another yawn.

Optimus regarded the empty seating area for a moment, thinking over his next course of action. Contacting Jack’s guardian would not happen, it seemed, with the help of the local government. This left Optimus two options, as it had before—contact her, or do not.

More specifically, contact her: and risk alienating several high-ranking government officials (not to mention possibly Fowler himself); or do not: and risk allowing the children to fall to harm without her knowledge. Optimus spared a moment to imagine the tired, sturdy woman he had seen in photographs and from a distance, sitting in her home, alone and fearful and wondering—

He tore his thoughts away, lest his resolve waver. In his chest, the Matrix droned, tendrils of brilliant ice curling through his seams. *How will my people be the safest?*

The answer, unfortunately, was simple. The fewer people who knew, the less the Autobots risked discovery. The woman must be left to draw her own conclusions.

Optimus strode out of the room, letting the movement of his feet carry him away from these unhappy thoughts and the choices that gave them such a bitter draft.

*(Selfish.)*
K.O. Burgers was, first and foremost, a pick up and take out joint. That being said, at some point between the mid-seventies and the present day, some enterprising, charismatic individual had convinced the proprietor to add a pair of rickety tables and some loosely grouped plastic lawn chairs to the limited space inside. You preferred the interior, honestly—the atmosphere might have been nonexistent; but the air was thick and rich with the smell of cooking meat and dough, with a weird undercurrent you could only classify as *Jasper restaurant smell*. Maybe it was unresolved romantic tension, or something.

Jack wasn't on shift today. Tini, his coworker, took your order, did a double-take between her notebook and your face, and rushed to the back.

“*Boss!*” she screeched, before the door could fully close behind her. “We got a *therapy special!*”

You watched, bemused, as she rushed her way through cooking your meal, her hair-netted Afro zooming back and forth behind the window like a panicked cloud.

There was a murmur of voices. Tini returned to the counter, looking a little sheepish, as the sounds of cooking resumed at a much saner pace behind her. “Your order’ll be right out,” she said belatedly.

“No rush,” you said. “What’s the ‘therapy special’?”

Tini did her best to ignore you. She was very good at it—you remembered hearing some rumor about her having done theater at Baylor University. You wondered what she’d been studying, to have wound up in Jasper.

After a few minutes, Mr. Callighan himself came out, your order balanced on a tray. The man was tall and thin, perpetually wrapped in a sweater vest to rival Raf's. He looked more like what you'd imagine a financial clerk or a mortician to look like rather than the owner of a restaurant. If he had a first name, it was a secret lost to the annuls of time. Tini excused herself to the kitchen as he set the tray down, along with a soda you hadn't ordered, and took the seat across from you.

“Hi?” you said. “Uh. What’s the ‘therapy special’?”

He gestured at your plate. “There are very few reasons why a person would order a double bacon and sauerkraut cheeseburger with onion rings,” he said, in his soft, accented voice. “And they all involve professional help.”

You snickered. “Fair. It’s been a day. A week. A month, actually, which kinda sucks. I usually like October.”

He waited.

“It’s just…” You ate half an onion ring. “I dunno. A lot of stuff.”

“I will guess. It is…” Mr. Callighan rubbed his chin, thinking. “The Wen girls. They have teamed up against you.”

“Nah, the only beef they’ve got in this town’s with you.” You smiled. “How’s your car, by the way?”

“Better. Wen had the decency to pay for the damages, if nothing else.” His long nose wrinkled.

You were still going strong on your resolution to stay out of the blast radius of *that* particular soap
opera, so you took a bite out of your burger instead of saying anything else on the subject. “Mmph. This's really good.”

Mr. Callighan nodded agreeably. “It is good to have someone to eat my sauerkraut. You would not believe the whining when I try to convert the people around here.”

“Heathens,” you agreed. Your mother had been making her own sauerkrauts and kimchis since before you were born. “Thanks for this, by the way. Expertly timed sauerkraut. burger.”

“It is always good time for sauerkraut burger.” He shook his head, as if to imply you were a silly goose. “What is the matter?”

“I….” you sighed, picking and choosing your words. “I made some friends from out of town, a couple months back. They're….they've been having some rough times, and it got rougher the other day. Way rougher. I wish I could help? But it's a problem that's just...above my pay grade on every conceivable level. I'm feeling...” you sighed, picking at your onion rings. “I'm trying to do what I can —like, the little things, being a friendly ear and all—but. They're still in danger.” You blew out a shaky breath. “And I can't change that.”

“What is the matter?” Mr. Callighan asked baldly.

“I want to.”

“But you cannot. If there was, you would be doing that, instead of eating sauerkraut with an old man.” Mr. Callighan paused, licking his lips nervously. “I am sure you know that not everyone comes to this country because of...good things.” He sighed. “Irish name, Russian accent. I think you know what I'm talking about. Are your friends happy here, compared to wherever they were? Are they safe here? Will your friends want to be here tomorrow?” He shot you a keen look. “These are the things to focus on. Friends are only sometimes needed for survival, but they are always needed to live.”

You blinked at him. That was more than you had every heard him say in one sitting,

He sighed, standing up. “You have a bad habit. The entire world is your family, and you are in charge of making sure it is safe. This is silly. Eat your burger.” He gave your shoulder a pat as he walked past. “And do not try to crush any armies on your way home. They have a nasty way of coming back around to get you.”

Chapter End Notes

The humans, on the subject of sauerkraut:
Raf will eat pretty much whatever's on his plate. It grows on him.
Jack appreciates how healthy it is. He eats his portion with the same face he uses to imbibe cough syrup.
Whomever introduced Miko to it made the mistake of saying it was 'like yogurt'. She took one look at the slimy, yellowed cabbage concoction sitting on her plate, and frisbee'd the whole thing down the hallway.
Fowler: more of a coleslaw guy; but he'll take it. Largely ambivalent.
June: No. No. No. It's cold and slimy and crunchy at the same time. Not in this house you don't.
Opportunity

Chapter Summary

The MER-B, or Mars Exploration Rover B, was the longest-lasting Mars rover in the history of space exploration. Named Opportunity; or Oppy for short, it operated from 2003 to 2018; making it one of the longest operating robots, period. It was a very good robot.

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone had a lovely Valentine's Day! To celebrate, have a chapter about Halloween.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You have wine. Why do you have wine?" You asked, vaguely horrified. "You work here. At this, a medical facility."

June rolled her eyes at you, arms stretching high over her head to reach the top of the doorway. Her ponytail was scrunched in a heap at the base of her neck as she craned her head back to see. "I'm off duty, relax. Besides, it's a holiday."

You handed her another piece of garish orange and black tinsel, clicking your tongue. "No. Wine is not Halloween food. Hershey's is Halloween food. Snickers is Halloween food. You are blaspheming against the old gods."

“I really don't know why we're friends,” June said, letting you take the bottle from her hands and put it back in the portable cooler. “You realize those things are just as bad for you, right?”

“I'd dispute that, but that's not the problem anyway. It's the principle of the thing. Tinsel or cobwebs?"

“Ooh, cobwebs, please. There should be a little fake blood in one of the bags, if you wanted to spatter the molding a little.”

“I feel like that's a weird vibe for the waiting room at a medical facility, but sure.” You stooped to fish around in the shopping bag. “Hey, glitter!”

June held out a hand. “There's a trick to the seals on these, let me.” She popped the top off the jar. “We used to love this stuff when I was a kid. Halloween in the seventies was a fun time.”

“Many thanks.” You dusted the edges of the fake webbing and stepped back, gauging the effect. “I miss Salem, y’know. Salem lives in a perpetual state of mild Halloween, it's nauseating. Still feels like summer to me here.”

June stepped off the ladder, rubbing her shoulder blades. “Your turn on the ladder, youngster. And
here I thought you liked the lack of frost on the ground. Nevada has its own seasons.”

You took her place with a mild yawn, careful on the creaking rungs of the ladder. You weren't a nervous person, but the catwalk at the Autobot base had taught you to heed the sounds of anything supporting your full weight. “Nevada has two seasons: summer and less intense summer. How's the glitter looking?”

“Like it was made by a blasphemer. I bet you're one of those northerners who razzes normal people about the way they drive in snow.” June poked your ankle lightly.

“There’s a technique to winter driving,” you said, with dignity, clutching a gob of cotton cobwebs to your chest with one hand. “One that no one below a certain latitude in America seems to have grasped.”

June balanced a fake spider on your shoe, apparently in retaliation.

“Does Jasper get into the holiday spirit, at all?” you asked hopefully, making no move whatsoever to dislodge the spider.

“For what it is.” June taped your foot spider to the molding. Its googly eyes skittered dramatically. “It gets concentrated. The kids don’t have a lot of selection, so they hit every house. The school does a haunted house sometimes.”

“Nice.” You supposed another yawn.

"Rough day?" June glanced at you sympathetically, finally smoothing her ponytail out again.

"What? Oh. Kinda. Spent some time catching up with an out-of-town friend." That was mildly true. More specifically, you had spent the night prior watching Ratchet and Wheeljack passive-aggressively fight over work space while you attempted to get actual work done.

Wheeljack and Ratchet in close proximity to each other was...a lot of personality. You recognized that they were very different people, who had their own flaws and quirks as individuals; and that some patience was warranted. But at the same time, that was a lot of personality per square foot of workshop. Especially when you were trying to work. You were considering moving to the catwalk; although attempting to concentrate on top of a fifteen-foot-high deathtrap from the 1970s had its own drawbacks.

“Skype's really something special,” June said, blithely misinterpreting entire swathes of your life. “Still, make sure you get some rest, okay?”

You nodded along, trying not to look as much like a heel as you felt. Lying, you had discovered, was one of those things that got steadily worse the longer it went on.

“So,” You said, like the manipulative wastrel you were. “Plans for the holiday?”

“Not anymore,” June snorted. “I had a date set up, but he canceled last minute. I'm probably staying home and making myself sick on tootsie rolls.”

You hissed in sympathy. “First of all, if you're going to make yourself sick on candy, do it with something worthwhile. Tootsie rolls aren't worth it.” You held your hand out. “Glue me, please. Secondly, you wanna come over? We can watch Laika films and pass out candy.”

“Laika’?” She handed you a mostly-empty bottle of Elmer's.
“Claymation studio. They’re good, trust me.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose—”

“My plans would be virtually identical should you skip, except for the amount of control I would hold over the remote.”

“...Tempting.” June offered you a wan smile, She stood back a step, surveying your work with a disturbingly critical eye. “I think this is as bedazzled as a doorway can be. You want to help with the front office?”

You slid off the ladder with a bounce, grabbing a couple of bags of arts and crafts stuff. Most of them were still full. “Jesus, June. What’d you do, rob a Michael's?”

She flapped a hand at you dismissively. “Shh, it'll look great.”

“Oh.” You were leery of anything that came out of chain crafts store large enough to exist on both coasts, but it wasn't your workplace.

“I do have a question, though.”

Oh, god. That phrase was going to take years off your lifespan. “Uh. Yes?”

“Have you gotten around to getting a new car yet?”

You tried not to look too wary. “Uh. No, actually. It's okay though, I've got a ride. Why, why do you ask?”

“Mm. I was going to ask if you wanted my old station wagon, defensive,” June poked you with a pipe cleaner. “But never mind.”

“Oh.” You were such a jerk. “Aw, thanks, June. It's really okay, though—I'm waiting for my next paycheck, that's all. You guys are getting a new car?”

“Sure.” Jack's motorcycle has me kind of inspired. I'm thinking something, you know--” June waved a hand through the air, pipe cleaner swishing dramatically. “Fast, sort of sleek. Less of a box on wheels." she chuckled at herself, mouth twisting. "Used, of course. I'm not that rich.”

Aw. You were definitely telling Arcee she said that. “No, sounds like a good idea. Everyone needs a manifestation of their mid-life crisis.”

June laughed, throwing the piper cleaner at you like a dart. It left a scrape on your hand as you went to bat it away; and the two you adjourned for disinfectant cream and candy.

…

The base had...recovered, overall. The air was a little grimmer, jokes were a little sparser; but all in all, the news of Praxus didn't change much about the current situation. Slowly, things were beginning to return to equilibrium.

It made you queasy. You wondered how many times they had forced themselves to push past reports of loss after loss, until the last bastion of civilization on their entire home planet flickering out was just more of the same.

When you had walked in to find the placed decked out in plastic Jack O'Lanterns, you had felt a visceral sense of relief along with your customary Miko Brand anxiety. Although frolic and
tomfoolery weren't the best things to have a surplus of around a military base, they were a fair sight better than the current mood.

Apparently, Optimus agreed with you. To everyone’s utmost shock, Miko had set a new personal precedent and gone through the proper channels. The Autobots were in an official state of celebration, whether they liked it or not.

The plastic pumpkins hadn’t been the half of it, however. Within a day, the base resembled nothing so much as Tim Burton’s take on the Cold War-era military bunker aesthetic. You weren’t exactly clear on the string of events that had led Miko to acquire the better half of the hardware store and June's decorating craft leftovers, but here you were. You had needed to coax a fidgety Arcee into letting you remove bits of cobwebs and hanging decorations from her sharp bits at least twice; and the season was still young. She, as the pointiest Autobot, was suffering.

The others had accepted this newest development with varying levels of enthusiasm. Bee was downright giddy, compared to how subdued he had been the last week. You had overheard Raf saying something about finding him a large enough cowboy hat to wear; but you had chosen to walk away before you heard anything else, rather than spoil their fun or tarnish your own plausible deniability.

Wheeljack, when he wasn't encroaching on Ratchet's existence, was good company for the holiday. If Bulkhead was the giant alien equivalent of your dad's more good-natured trucker buds, Wheeljack was the image of the daredevil old dustbeaters that would drop in just long enough for a good time, before vanishing back onto the road; the ones Gran used to kick up a fuss over you listening to when they stopped by the house. If you had been much, much younger, you thought Wheeljack might have wound up being your favorite—he could spin a story when he needed to, that was for sure. And first account sci-fi stories was a concept that appealed to the part of you that was still, despite everything, a little bit in love with the fact that the Autobots were a thing. Screw you, universe. Giant robots are cool.

All in all, the Autobots were appreciating the holiday in their own way.

“You know,” you told Miko, the afternoon of. “I'm surprised you aren't more jazzed about Halloween. I would have thought you'd have this town in a vice grip for the holiday.”

Miko shrugged, fingers still twiddling the controls of the hand held gaming device she had been absorbed in. “Japan does spooky stuff in August. I got one of the Wen sisters and Sierra’s friend to help me toilet paper that big plastic-looking looking house outside of town, does that count?”

You knew which house she meant. It was a McMansion to put any coastal property in New England to shame. “Acceptable. Quota met.”

You heard your name being called the next room over, in the medbay. You frowned. “Was that Ratchet?”

“Dunno.” Miko hid her face in her game.

You shot her a deeply suspicious look, which she studiously ignored. Nevertheless, you set your laptop aside and trekked over to the medbay.


“Well?” asked the human-shaped lump of dough standing in the middle of the room, in Ratchet’s voice. “How do I look?”
You stared at it, for a very long moment. It stared back expectantly.

You weighed the pros and cons of screaming for help.

Raf was sitting at the foot of the medbay table, ensconced in a pile of wires and computer consoles. His face was a study in existential resignation. “Hey.”

“Hey, Raf.” You turned back to the Play-Dough monster, gesturing vaguely. “…Is that, uh. Ratchet?”

“Obviously,” the thing said incorrectly, crossing its arm-like appendages. In the other room, you could hear Miko laughing hysterically. “We’ve been developing a way to blend more effectively into human society.”

“I. No.” You shook your head emphatically, your horror overcoming your sense of social niceties. “You are still developing. There is much development to be had.”

“Surely it’s not that bad,” Ratchet scoffed. In the background, Raf put his face in his hands, shoulders shaking.

He looked like Odo from Deep Space 9, but in a candy apple-colored clown wig. “It's...I'm sorry, Ratchet, but it really is. You'd stand out.”

“In a good way?”

“In an ‘inciting mass panic’ way.”

The dough person made a sighing noise. Except for its ill-formed gash of a mouth, it didn’t move. “Oh, very well then.”

The human-blob vanished in a surprisingly shimmery cloud of pixels, and after a second, the actual Ratchet came around the corner, looking put-upon. “At least we know the technology is serviceable, at any rate. We can focus on the graphics once we have the groundwork laid. If you're certain it was unacceptable.”

“Yeah,” said Raf, quietly relieved. “That was kind of the person equivalent of comic sans font.”

You snorted. “Still, it was very impressive. How far away can you get the avatar to go?”

“At present?” Ratchet shot Raf a poorly disguised look of approval. “Upwards of 200 feet. A significant improvement over earlier models.”

“Nice.” You offered Raf a fist bump. He took it, grinning shyly.

“Hrmph. Yes.” Ratchet had apparently reached his pleasantness limit for the day, because he turned on his heel. “Now, if you’ll both excuse me, I have a design to pull from the servers, if it really was so horrible as all that.”

“Thanks,” Raf muttered once Ratchet had gone. “He was so happy with it, I didn’t wanna say anything.”

“Abject horror has a way of overcoming sentimentality,” you agreed. “You okay? You look a little disappointed.”

Raf shrugged listlessly. “I dunno, it’s nothing.”
“You sure?” You sat down next to him, resting your chin on a hand.

He sighed. “It's... stupid. I guess. I was hoping Bee could use it to come with me for trick-or-treating.”

“Aren’t you going with your family?”

“Not really.” He made a face. “I'm the only who's still young enough, except for Pilar. And she's going with friends. Everyone's kind of expecting me to go with Jack and Miko.”

You winced. Jack was, as far as you could tell, going under duress. Miko wasn’t awesome with boundaries. “Your parents?”

“Working.”

“Whoa, really? Jeez.”

“Eh. It's not like I brought it up with them way in advance, or anything.” Raf disentangled himself from the puddle of wires and cords. “It’s okay, really. I'm sure it'll turn out fine.” He offered you a smile and a shrug; what can you do? and walked off, clutching his backpack to his chest.

You sat in the empty medbay, wondering quietly if you were putting things out of proportion. Maybe this was a thing, with large families. You were a second-generation only child; sharing attention and resources with siblings wasn’t something you had ever had to deal with, personally.

After a moment, you got your phone out and texted Bee. Hey. You got any plans for the holiday?

…

“Oh my goodness,” June said from the window, a hand raised to cover her laugh. “You have to come see this.”

You wandered over, candy bowl in hand. Miko, Jack and Raf were making their way up your driveway, accompanied by a cardboard robot. “Aw. What's Jack, a zombi?”

“A character from a video game, I think.” June peered out the window. “I'm not sure what Miko's supposed to be. Besides very, very green.”

You looked again. She was covered in plastic, home-made armor that made her look vaguely spherical. Bulkhead was going to be over the moon. “Uh, swamp monster?”

“Sounds plausible.”

The doorbell rang. You both hurried over.

“Trick or treat!” The kids bellowed. You weren’t sure why Jasper kids thought that more candy was awarded for higher volume, but it was good to know for next year. You could probably incorporate earmuffs into a costume one way or another.

“Oh, you all look so good,” June smiled at them, hands clasped dramatically. Moms, jeez.

Raf seemed to be a space explorer from some old cartoon or other. He adjusted the bedazzled colander perched crookedly on his head, grinning shyly. “Thanks, Mrs. Darby.”

“Oh my god, Mom.” Jack eyed June's headgear, vaguely horrified. “I thought you burned that thing.”
June laughed, witch’s hat bobbing precariously. The aluminum star dangles clattered together. “There’s nothing wrong with the classics.” Her eyes lingered on the cardboard robot. “And you are?”

Raf reached up and pressed a button on the robot’s cardboard-encased arm. “We’re doing a theme.”

“Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!” said the robot, tinnily.

You laughed, trying not to sound too nervous. “Hey, a classic. Well,” you dropped a couple pieces in everyone’s bags. “You guys stay safe out there. You guys have coats?”

“And flashlights?” June added. The robot nodded.

Miko groaned. “That’s like, the third time we’ve been asked that. Jasper is the land of parents.”

“Yes, Mrs. Darby,” Raf said politely, over her. Miko elbowed his colander.

“Takes a village.” June adjusted her hat. “Go on, you’re wasting moonlight. Stay safe, you three!”

“Boop bweep,” said the robot, shooting her a thumb’s up. He followed the children back down the driveway.

“Huh,” June watched him. “I don’t think I recognized the robot.”

“He’s good people, no worries.” You ushered her back into the house. “C’mon, you ever played Cards Against Humanity? It’s a good Halloween game.”

She followed you in, casting glances back out at the sidewalk every once in a while.

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Chapter End Notes

Bulkhead: Hey, kinda cool you arrived right before a holiday, right?
Wheeljack, who had assumed humans were Just Like That: A what now?
Chapter Summary

The International Star Registry is a catalog of every star discovered, visible or not. It is available online, and contains the registry number, name, magnitude, and even photographs.

Chapter Notes

This was a rough one. I re-read my backlog, and realized there was a lot more work to do before it was ready to see the light of day, so. Have a freshly written, hot-off-the-presses chapter! Without a more or less ready backlog, updates might get a little strained; but there'll be something up every Sunday, even if it's just 1K.

Thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A little known fact—it was the voice box that was physically in the throat. The vocalizer—the part that held the software, the really important part—was actually a section of the processor itself, located at the lower back of the helm.

Bumblebee knew this because that was where the claw marks were.

Comprehension and the act of speaking itself were controlled by two different areas of the processor. One of Bee's few, hazy memories of the front line sick bay involved tracing the diagram, brushing his fingers against the concave wounds in the back of his head. The gouges in his helm had matched the picture exactly.

(Bumblebee sometimes wondered, on lonesome, overcast night patrols, whether the warlord had been aiming for them.)

Before—in those far-off, early days in the war, when life had involved less spare time, more chaos—grammar had been a quirk. Bumblebee had been born and bred in Praxus; of course he had a bit of a formal bend. Bee had played up the stereotype. It had been fun, in a way; a little slice of home to color his personality. The odd little scout who minded his Ps and Qs, the team rookie who had long stopped being a rookie. It used make Prowl laugh.

After Tyger Pax, grammar had become a tool.

He had clawed his way back to comprehensibility, even with the aid of replacement parts. Ratchet and the rest of the medical team had constructed a simple language interpreter to replace the more complex one he had lost; but the integration process would have been slow going even under the best of circumstances. A civil war was not the best of circumstances.

While the words had gone, though, the rules remained. It was machine language in its crudest form; the language of on's and off's. Still, it was better than the alternative; and Bee had taken that and
weaponized it, painstakingly re-inventing Cybertronian a statement at a time.

It took orns. Bee had dealt with constant migraines, as his central processing unit struggled with unwieldy programming. There was a reason binary wasn't used as a high level language.

(At least it wasn't as though Bee would need to learn another language, though. Certainly not an ill-formed, contradictory language that needed hardware he couldn't install in order to pronounce most of the sounds. English was a sucker's game. He didn't care what Raf said.)

Bee absently reached up to keep the human from sliding off his perch on Bee's shoulder. Raf pressed his sneakers into Bee's shoulder for friction, eyes never leaving his book.

Bumblebee asked Raf if he knew how he could understand low-level Cybertronian.

Raf looked up from his book. “What?”

Bee repeated himself.

“I don't...” Raf frowned, adjusting on Bee's shoulder to see his face. “I figured it was just one of those things you get used to. You know how sometimes, if already you know something's supposed to be in binary, you just kind of start reading 10 as two instead of ten; or 11011 as twenty-seven? It's like that. After a while, it just sort of sinks under your skin.” Raf craned his head to scan Bumblebee's face, searching for comprehension.

Bee had none to give. If his mind had ever worked like that, it had been scraped out of his head at Tyger Pax.

Raf leaned against the side of Bee's helm, patting his chin guard in silent apology. “It's probably just a 'me' thing. Miko says I'm like Professor X, but without the debilitating spinal trauma.”

Bee indicated that Raf didn't have to make him feel better, but he appreciated it the sentiment. He asked if he could get Raf's opinion on something.

“Sure?”

Bee emailed Raf a hastily put-together pdf file, suppressing a shudder at the harsh, inanimate sensation of human tech. Raf squinted, making out the poorly rendered Cybertronian symbols. “Are these supposed to be personnel files?”

Bee nodded.

“They look kinda stupid.”

Yes, he was well aware.

Raf grinned, sheepish. “I'm sorry. I'll get around to upgrading my phone soon, I promise. I'm on my parent's plan, I'm not supposed to void the warranty.”

Bee looked pointedly at the little screen.

“Sorry. Okay, so—so is this supposed to be a little file with all the Autobots in it? I like the icon.” Raf held his phone up to his nose. “So then underneath it is—wow. You really don't like some of Fowler's coworkers, do you?”

They had tried to talk over Bee's head. That wasn't the part Raf was supposed to be looking at.
"You sent me the entire thing, jeez. If you don't want me to know what you think of people, don't put mean attributes on their--"

Raf has paused halfway through scrolling past his, Jack's and Miko's files. The symbol listing them as part of Bee's family unit was just barely legible on the gridded pattern of the pixelated screen.

Raf wasn't moving. Bee chirped a general query, a little worried.

"No, yeah, I'm--" Raf cleared his throat, noisily. "It's fine. Bottom of the page, right? Are these just, like, miscellaneous files?"

This was an awful lot of emotion on display in reaction to calling a spade a spade, but Bee accepted the return to the topic with an affirmative. Jack's mother's and neighbor's files had met the criteria to be sorted into a more permanent file, but Bee needed to decide how to index them.

Raf studied the screen for a long moment. "They don't have to go in the same spot, right? Figure out the easier one first. Just make a new file if you get stuck."

After a moment of consideration, Bee edited the file so that Jack's neighbor was in the same category as Miko, Jack and Raf. They seemed as though they would be hanging around for a while; but even if they left, their file was self-contained enough that it wouldn't be a problem to move it again.

Bee hoped they wouldn't. They were twitchy, sure; and they had a bad habit of hovering in the background that reminded Bee weirdly of Optimus; but they were kind, in an oddball sort of way. They didn't have the verve and vither of Miko, or Raf's quiet, unflinching curiosity; but they had sat with Bee after the fall of Praxus, leaning their slight little weight against the side of his palm to ground him. They were just a funky little...creature.

"Aww." Raf nudged Bee's chin guard with his elbow, grinning widely.

Bumblebee ignored him.

After a moment of consideration, he added a new file for Jasper denizens. After a moment, Mrs. Darby, Pilar Esquivel, and those two restaurant keepers Optimus had told Bee to give a wide berth all appeared in the file.

"There." Raf considered the screen, emanating a vague sort of satisfaction. "Easy, right?"

Bee nodded. There was a lot of topics Raf understood startlingly well, but this would not be one of them. The rest of the team didn't nearly spend as much time around humans as Bumblebee did; they didn't truly understand how young Raf actually was. Bee was alright with that—who knew how Optimus would react if he knew he had accepted literal children under his command—but it meant that Bee had to take up the slack. Raf deserved to live on a world without war; but until that could happen, Bee would give his friend as much of a childhood as he could manage.

Listening to the gritty details of Bumblebee's debilitating war injury wasn't on the agenda.

Raf shot him a calm, mildly skeptical look, picking his book up again. *I know you're sheltering me,* his body language said. *But I'll allow it this time.*

Bee settled back, pleased with the interaction. He beeped a general query about Raf's book. If he was lucky, Raf would translate it into Cybertronian for him. Raf's translations were always incredible affairs; at least, compared to some Bee could mention. Ratchet had a bad habit of editorializing.
“Hey!” Wheeljack stuck his head through the door. “Just the squishy I was looking for.”

You automatically glanced behind you. No, he was definitely talking to you. “Hey, Wheeljack. What’s going on?”

He braced his arm against the frame of the door, in a move from every nineties teen movie ever. “Y’know, not much. Got an academic question for you.”

You saved your work and shut your laptop, smiling gamely. The Autobots occasionally threw you what you could only describe as astronomy curve balls—the distance to a particular star, NASA history, how humans planned on getting the Mars rovers back. The sort of things a habit of staring at the sky did not equip you to answer; but access to a search engine and your grandmother's phone number did. “Alright, shoot.”

“Yeah. How do you apologize to a human?” Wheeljack asked.

“What?”

“Apologizing, but like...to a human. I heard flowers are a thing?”

“Um.”

“Danger! Danger! Danger! Why do you ask?”

“Corrupted data in the atmospheric package,” He lied, in a manner that could have been smooth under any other circumstance.

You looked at him, mildly.

His grin lost a little of its ease. “Uh. Ha. You know, better check in with Ratchet. Might've lost some stuff in the...Ethernet.” He ducked back around the door.

Why could none of these robots avoid suspicion to save their lives? “Wheeljack--”

There was a very odd noise; like two industrial-sized dumpsters that had taken their differences to the street. You shoved your laptop off your lap and scrambled to the door.

Optimus' shin had gained a nasty-looking dent, about on a level with the nose of Wheeljack's altmode. It was hard to compare the two, though; since the force of the impact had apparently sent Wheeljack skidding into a small pile of tubing, which had caught his tires and sent him rolling. He was currently rocking to a halt on his roof, tires turning sluggishly.

You put your hand over your mouth. The pile of tubing collapsed in on itself with a faint rattle.

Wheeljack transformed, landing face down on the floor. “Ow. Mornin', Prime.”

“Greetings, Wheeljack.” Optimus took a step, frowned faintly at his dented leg, and moved to help Wheeljack up. “Are you hurt?”

He had a long blue mark along his chest. “No worries. Landed on my head. Nothing I was using at the time.” He grimaced, poking the skid mark.

“Oh my god, you bonehead.” You hurried over. “That's not a good way to end a conversation. Are you okay? Your chest--?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Wheeljack waved and arm at you.

“Their concern does not deserve your dismissal,” Optimus said gently. “Ratchet is expecting you in
Wheeljack garbled something in Cybertronian under his breath, and sauntered off.

You raised your eyebrows at his back. “The Autobots have a really different version of military discipline than Earth.”

“Yes,” Optimus agreed. He turned back down the hallway.

“Uh?” you said, without thinking. He paused.

“You aren't going to the medbay, too?”

“No. I have other matters to attend to first.”

You bit your lip. Not your circus, not your monkeys. Optimus was an adult who could make these sorts of decisions for himself. Besides, it was probably--

(You stole another look at the dent in his shin. Your stomach rolled.)

--probably not nearly as bad as it looked.

“Please do not hesitate to share your thoughts,” Optimus said, kindly.

“Your leg is concave,” you blurted. “I could use it as a canoe. Please go to the medbay. I'd take it as a personal favor.”

Optimus leaned over to see his own leg better. “...Ah.”

“Yeah.” You realized, suddenly, how little of his body he could see standing upright. That seemed uncomfortable.

He regarded his shin, visibly weighing the pros and cons of letting Ratchet chase him down. “Indeed. I suppose it will give me an opportunity to speak with Wheeljack.”

“I'll walk you,” you offered, before your brain caught up with your mouth. The last thing he probably wanted was witnesses.

“I appreciate your offer,” Optimus said, gently, “However...” He went to kneel, and by the time your eyes could re-assemble the shape in front of you, he was a truck.

Well. “I guess that works.”

“It is—one moment.” Optimus fell silent. “Ratchet has requested your presence.”

“My presence, or an update on my work?”

“Is there a difference?”

One involved an email containing a report; maybe along with some screenshots, depending on the flavor of the day. The other involved going to the medbay, waiting until the chaos died down enough for you to get a word in, and getting inevitably side-tracked. You knew which one you preferred when you were actually trying to get work done. “A bit of a difference, I guess.”

“At your earliest convenience, Ratchet has requested your presence,” Optimus said gravely. “Although to what end, I cannot say.”
You suppressed a sigh. You doubted Ratchet phrased it quite so nicely. “Okay. Lay on, and damned be he, and all that.”

Chapter End Notes

On Cybertron, having someone run into your legs might be a little bit like banging your shin on a coffee table, but if the coffee table falls over and yells, too.
Luminosity

Chapter Summary

The brightness of a celestial body is sometimes measured as the luminosity; defined as the amount of energy emitted from the star. The sun, for example, is one L, or $3.9 \times 10^{26}$ watts. Since luminosity is not an apparent measure, many objects that appear dim viewed from Earth are, in reality, much more luminous than one might perceive.

Chapter Notes

Fun fact: this chapter didn't exist prior to the big backlog re-write of last week! That's not a very fun fact for me, since that means minimal editing and a bunch of deadline hassle; but maybe it'll be more fun once this chapter is posted. Thank you again to everyone who's been commenting, kudos-ing, and otherwise reading this story! And a very special thank you to bertie and Terpsikeri for spotting a couple of typos in the last chapter! Thank you both very much, I really appreciate it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ah, Optimus. Take a seat.” Ratchet said as the two of you entered. “You, pull up a chair. I have a task for you.”

“I don’t suppose this will go fast enough that I can get back to that other thing you asked me to do, will it?” you asked, sweetly, as Optimus settled himself on the table.

“Unfortunately not,” Ratchet said, brushing off your passive aggression with the ease of a veteran. “I want to begin teaching you how to operate some of this equipment.”

You blinked. “Sorry, what?”

“Shall I write it out for you?” Ratchet snipped. “I’m not happy about it either.”

Optimus looked politely at the wall, apparently resigned to letting the two of you have it out in front of him. You took pity on him and moved so that you weren’t literally across his shoulders.

“The other day I heard you actually threaten Wheeljack for going near your equipment,” you said, flatly. “This is a pretty radical shift.”

“Wheeljack was attempting to salvage parts for that monstrosity he calls a means of transportation. As long as you don’t try to disassemble anything, I should think you’d be a vast improvement.”

That didn't feel like a compliment. “Once again, though, why--”

“Because,” Ratchet said, speaking slowly and clearly. “We have one medic. One. We are attempting to fight a war. Take your time putting the pieces together, I'll wait.”
You jerked back. “You want to train us as medical personnel?”

“Ratchet,” Optimus murmured.

You shook your head, emphatically. “Nope. Not happening. Not comfortable with this.”

Ratchet sighed. “Truth be told, neither am I. Unfortunately, you're the closest thing we have to spare personnel—”

“No.” You took a large step backwards. “I'm not qualified. I don't want someone's life in my hands, Ratchet. I can't do this.”

Ratchet's expression tightened. “So you would just stand by—?”

Optimus stood up and put a hand on Ratchet's shoulder. “They have already done more than enough. If it is more help you require—”

“Oh, what would you suggest?” Ratchet snapped, turned out from under Optimus' hand. It withdrew immediately. “That I turn to the children? Ask Raf to help me perform surgery?”

“There's more than five humans in the world.” You rubbed your temples, fighting off a headache. “Ask Fowler for—”

“I have,” Ratchet snarled.

You glanced at Optimus, and caught his eye. His mouth flattened, bemused; it would this was news to him as well.

“Old friend,” Optimus said, deep voice gentle. “This is the first I have heard of this.”

Ratchet sighed, turned back to peer up at him. “Unsurprising. Somewhere along the line, my requisition requests have been being blocked. Fowler has proven unwilling or unable to assist.”

Optimus' brow darkened the slightest bit. “Uncharacteristic. I shall speak with him.”

“I have his number,” you offered, a little sheepishly. You weren't sure how much this was your business, but you knew you were a less intimidating option than Optimus. You felt a little guilty for refusing to become a robot doctor; but in all seriousness, nope. You couldn't keep a houseplant alive, much less a bleeding alien.

“Thank you, but that is quite unnecessary.” Optimus was already turned away, staring into the middle distance as he accessed internal comms.

Ratchet huffed. “I expect Fowler will be able to disregard his end of our agreement just as well if it's to Optimus' face.”

You bit your lip. “I...I'm sorry. I'm just not a doctor, Ratchet.”

“Believe me, that's more than obvious.”


Ratchet sighed. “In all honesty, that's probably for the best.”
“Agent Fowler reports no such knowledge of any refusal on their part to meet our needs.” Optimus said neutrally, turning back to the two of you.

“A likely story--” Ratchet sputtered.

“However,” Optimus continued inexorably. “He does recall an email chain consisting of several long complaints regarding the competency and character of several key officials along the requisitional process. No further clarification was forthcoming, however.”

Ratchet seemed to wilt a little. "I, er."

Optimus stared him down. You coughed, wishing you could leave without it being awkward.

“I...was not, perhaps, my most eloquent.” Ratchet sighed warily, crossing his arms. "I accept full responsibility."

Optimus started to say something and paused, glancing at you.

You nodded, relieved; you could take a hint. “I'll hit the road. Call me if you need anything else.”

You hurried out, feeling only a little like you were running away.

…

The moment the door slid closed behind the human, Optimus turned back to his old friend.

“Ratchet.”

He groaned. “I know, Primus. I was frustrated. Agent's Fowler's job is to ensure this sort of thing doesn't--”

“Agent Fowler's job is to represent his country's interests to us, and our interests to his superiors.”

Optimus closed his eyes. This was not going to go well if he didn't calm down; but the instinctive jitter of fear in his chest was difficult to curb. The Matrix, for once, hurt more than it helped, a monotonous rush of fix it fix it fix it now. "He is neither your translator, nor your whipping boy."

Ratchet was looking at him with surprise mingled with regret, and Optimus realized again how much he had kept from his friend. Their position on Earth was not as tenuous as it felt--Optimus preferred to assume few things were, these days. That didn't make any less vital however. As such, anything that could bring it into jeopardy was a source of great anxiety. This minor drama would not lose them their alliance, but it had strained it more than Optimus had known. Optimus could only be grateful that their liaison was someone so...well. Understanding was generous, but perhaps long-suffering fit. Still, finding how much that good nature had been tested was disquieting.

Optimus forced his voice to soften. “You will make your apologies to Fowler. We cannot afford this sort of diplomatic incident, my friend.”

Ratchet's brow knit. “We can't just let these bureaucrats walk over us, Optimus. If we are to get what we need, we need to be willing to ask for it.”

Optimus ignored the irony of a doctor who used to operate out of an unlicensed clinic speaking of bureaucracy to a file clerk. “Perhaps so. However, there is a difference between enforcing our boundaries and unwarranted aggression. I had thought that was a difference you had understood.”

It was always a little surreal to see the effect his disappointment had on someone who he respected so much. Ratchet looked away, expression locked in something bitter and miserable.
Discipline, suggested the Matrix without words. If he is a liability, he must be controlled.

Optimus suppressed a sigh, trying to let the cold impulse wash over him and fade. It clung stubbornly. “No harm has been done,” he said, to both it and his friend. “But I entreat you to be more diplomatic in the future.”

Ratchet’s face twitched sardonically. “And by that, I expect you mean ’ask someone else to talk to them for me’.”

“If that is what you require,” Optimus said, and the note of warmth in his voice was genuine now. He wondered idly if Ratchet would hear it, or if it was all in his head.

Ratchet nodded, respectfully, and turned back to his instruments. “Now, check up. Don’t give me any excuses, you’re overdue. Any unusual discomforts?”

Optimus sat back on the table, resigned to his fate. “No,” he said, truthfully.

(The Matrix hummed in his chest, cold enough to bite.)

…

“Sorry, kiddo.” Arcee leaned against the crate, watching the catwalk out of the corner of her eye. “I don’t do contracts anymore.”

“Aw!” Miko flopped on the couch, which creaked alarmingly. “Can you teach me to mess Vince up, at least?”

Arcee felt a pang of nostalgia for Chromia, Prowl, and everyone else who had been forced to deal with her as a young person. This was obviously payback for all the times she had forced someone to reign her in, lest she cause more damage to the surrounding landscape than the Decepticon forces. Prowl would laugh himself stupid if he could have seen her now. “Optimus and Bee put a lot of effort into keeping Vince alive, Miko. You need to respect that.” Arcee considered. “Also, murder’s bad,” she added as an afterthought.

“I’m not gonna kill him,” Miko waved a hand dismissively. “Just, y’know. Put the fear of Miko in ’em.”

Arcee wasn’t sure what the guidelines were for caring for little alien creatures; but inadvertently teaching them that wanton destruction and intimidation were viable problem-solving strategies probably didn’t meet them. “Miko, take it from me when I say you need to cool it. What did he do?”

Miko pouted. "Nothing..."

"I think we both know that's not true."

Miko looked up at her, searching her face for something. Arcee tried not to speculate. "Do you think I'm overreacting?"

"Without knowing anything else, I legitimately can't say." Arcee sighed. She forgot what it was sometimes to worry about what people thought of her. "But Miko? I sincerely doubt it."

“He's..." Miko's fists bunched the fabric covering her legs. She was trembling with contained emotion. "It's like the entire world revolves around him,” she snapped, and the floodgates opened. “He just waltzes through life like everything’s just been waiting for him to arrive, like he thinks he’s doing people a favor by just showing up! He doesn't think about—about anyone, even if he says..."
they're his friend, and that's just—people are just fine with it.” Miko made a sound like a muffled growl. “Like he's got some kind of right to walk over them! And I'm just, I'm tired of people being sad, and mopey? Because if he actually cares about them as little as he acts like he does, he doesn't. Deserve it.”

Miko stood in place, swaying a little, breathing heavily. She flopped back on the couch and buried her face in the cushions.

Arcee suspected she and Miko had different ideas of what 'cooling it' entailed. “Good now?”

“No,” Miko said, muffled.

“Good. First off, you can't punch your friend's feelings back into shape. Don't try. You're just going to escalate the problem. If you want to help your friend, focus on your friend. If you want to get to Vince, get to Vince another way.” Arcee leaned in close. “Think carefully about which one you're going for, here.”

Miko rolled to face the sofa back. Her little hands were knotted in the fabric covering her elbows.

Arcee suppressed a sigh. It was a strange feeling, facing the embodiment of your own faults re-imagined as strengths. When Arcee had been young and angry and stupid, she had used her anger and stupidity to level buildings and pick off whatever enemy forces crawled out of the rubble. She had left that life behind by choice, but not easily; and watching that familiar fire burn in someone else was...unsettling.

It wasn't the same, not really; and it was an insult to Miko the compare the two. The young human wasn't the person Arcee had been; not even a little. Miko was much too bright to ever becomes that sort of person.

(The tang of rust and fuel in the air and the familiar rhythm; just impact after impact while she waited for her vision to clear enough to see exactly what she was attacking—)

Miko would never be forced to become that. Not if Arcee could help it.

She let the thought linger for a moment; and let go of it, content to let it fade on it own. Miko had friends to keep her grounded. She had family. So did Arcee, for that matter, at least these days. She didn't need to be afraid.

Something occurred to her—advice Prowl had given her, back in the day. “Listen. Talk to Vince first, if you need to,” Arcee said, wondering what it said about her that she was passing on advice from Prowl to an impressionable little alien. “If he doesn't listen, talk to someone he will listen to. Preferably with the ability to take privileges away, if possible.”

Miko rolled over. “No one’s gonna listen to me.”

“They will,” Arcee said. “And if if they don’t? Talk louder. Explosions are also acceptable.”

Miko snorted, and eyed her out sideways. “Can I get that in writing?”

“Go, kid. Do your foul work elsewhere.” Arcee settled her weight against the crate, drumming her heels.

Miko jumped up, scaling the ladder and bolting for the door. She slowed halfway across the floor. “Arcee?”
She tilted her head.

“Thank you,” Miko said, and sprinted the rest of the way out the door.

Arcee listened to the soft *pat-pat-pat* of sneakers on grating. Once it had faded out of earshot, she aimed a particularly hard kick at the crate she had been sitting on. It grunted in pain.

Arcee hopped off and shoved the lid to the side. “Come on, *Vince*. You and I are due for a little talk.”

Wheeljack clambered out of the crate, landing in an inelegant heap. “Whew, boy. That thing needs vents or something. You couldn't've sped things along?”

“I could have,” Arcee said sweetly.

Wheeljack eyed her warily, and Arcee had a vivid flashback to the last time she'd interacted with a Wrecker outside of Bulkhead. Wheeljack hadn't been there; but Arcee distinctly recalled the path of destruction she had left in her wake that day. Wheeljack would have heard about it on a professional basis is nothing else, as a demolitions expert. Besides, Whirl was an incorrigible gossip.

“So,” Arcee said. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Depends on your rates,” Wheeljack sat on the crate, stretching ostentatiously.

“If *I'm* doing the counseling, we're all in trouble.” Arcee hopped up next to him. “Come on. Miko's not that random, despite appearances. What did you do to her?” Something clicked. “Wait, scratch that. What did you do to Bulkhead?”


He caught himself, falling silent.

Arcee waited for him to continue. “Miko?”

Wheeljack shrugged, looking sheepish. “She just...heard some stuff out of context, that's all. Doesn't get the history involved, y'know.”

“Mm.” Arcee drummed her fingers on her leg.

“I was just...” Wheeljack sighed. “I was talking with Bulk' about my, uh. Impending itinerary.”

“Frag,” said Arcee, startled. The *Jackhammer* had been a wreck, as far as she had heard. The integrity of the vessel had been compromised severely when it had left a *literal chunk* of the bulkhead embedded in the roof of the base. She had thought Ratchet was planning on stripping it for spare parts. “That soon? Wasn't expecting you out of here inside of a century.”

“What can I say?” Wheeljack winked. “The doc really came through. I can be incentivizing when I need to be.”

Arcee suppressed the urge to take hook a finger in his optic lid and yank. “You've been annoying your way back into space.”

Wheeljack nodded agreeably. “That's the long and short, sure. I'll be out inside of a local lunar cycle. So I'm telling Bulk' the good news when the kid walks in, and she just--” Wheeljack flicked a servo, mimicking a tiny explosion. “Started yelling like I'd pulled out a purple insignia. Bulkhead had to take her out of the room, it was so bad. I didn't know they could make that much noise.”
Arcee thought of the miasma of muffled screams and laughter that surrounded the school after the final bell, and chose not to comment. “And let me guess. Ever since then, Miko's been doing the full Count of Monte Cristo on you.”

Wheeljack looked blank. Arcee had been on this planet for too fragging long. “Never mind. So, you went to the most awkward human being on the face of this planet.”

Wheeljack winced. “They're not that bad.”

“They are. They really are. Sweet, sure, but we're talking Prowl levels of social discomfort. You ever meet Cosmos? That level.”

“Harsh.” Wheeljack nudged her. “And be nice to Cosmos, he's not so bad.”

Arcee just looked at him.

He sighed. “Fine, that's fair. But your little guy's on the kid's side, couldn't go there. And the little orange one--”

“Raf.”

“--Yeah, him. Best of luck getting him away from Bee and the doc. If he's not with one, he's with the other. Thus...” Wheeljack spread his hands.

Arcee considered this. “Have you spoken with Bulkhead about this?”

“Yeah. Nah, he hasn't got the foggiest either.”

“No.” Arcee thought she felt a helm ache coming on. “Why was Bulkhead upset?”

Wheeljack looked at her as though she'd started gibbering. “He wasn't?”

“Miko's protective. Miko got angry with you while you were talking to one other person. Thus, she probably thought you made Bulkhead sad, somehow.” Arcee drummed her fingers hard enough to be audible. “You do the math, scientist. Were you listening to what she was saying just now at all?”

“She wasn't talking about me, she was talking about this Vince kid.” He said, stubbornly. "Look, I didn't do anything to Bulk. He's fine, he loves it here. Only thing worrying him is this little...” He struggled to find the words. “Temper tantrum thing that's been going on. I'll deal with it, and he'll be fine again.”

“Are you sure about that?” Arcee asked.

“Of course.”

“Are you sure, though? Did you check with Bulkhead?”

Wheeljack looked cagey. “Not, uh, as such, but--”

Arcee groaned softly. “You're an idiot.”

He huffed at her, throwing his hands up. “Ah, you're no help. Just tell me how to fix the squishy, and I'll get out of your space.”

Infant. Arcee sighed. “Fine, here's the short version. You have two possibilities here. Either you're right, and you somehow made your best friend's friend very upset and you need to fix it. Or, I'm
right, and you made your best friend upset and his other friend desperately angry as a direct result. And you still need to fix it.”

“Fine, I get it,” Wheeljack said, most likely falsely, “Especially like how you gave the little monster a plan of a attack to go off of, by the way. Very helpful.”

“I don't think you understand which side I'm on,” Arcee said mildly. “You hurt someone. *Fix. It.*”

Wheeljack was silent for a long, long moment. Eventually, he left without a backwards glance, leaving Arcee sitting on top of her empty crate.

Chapter End Notes

At some point, Arcee will put 'interpersonal moderator' on her resume; and every one who has ever seen her in battle will start trembling. Whether that shaking is fear or laughter depends on which side of the battlefield they were on at the time.
Light Speed

Chapter Summary

Light travels at approximately 300 million meter per second. This is the speed cap for all the known universe; nothing can go faster. This constant is useful for measuring large distances—the term lightyear, for example, refers to the literal amount of distance light travels in a year. For reference, the sun is about seven light minutes away; and Mars is, on average, about 12.5 light minutes.

Chapter Notes

This is a 'just take it' sort of chapter. It's been re-written at least five different times over the months; and now that it's time to actually post it, I feel like I'm saying goodbye to a very unpleasant house guest. Go, be free, frustrating chapter. And, once again, many thanks to bertie for catching the typos in the last chapter my sleep-deprived brain did not! I'm pretty sure I've got all of them this time. That's actually a lie, I'm positive I missed at least one; but we're all doing our best here, and that's what counts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Holy shit.” You sat up in bed and lunged for your phone.

Halfway through calling Ratchet, you registered that it was still very much dark out; and that Ratchet was one of the few people you knew who was both able and willing to drive to your house to yell at you in person for waking him up. You hung up on the second ring, squinting into the glare of the screen. It was some time between your (very late) bed time and the crack of dawn; which, honestly, only entertained a window of a few hours or so. You groaned, setting your phone back down by the charger without bothering to plug it back in. Calling the Autobots at this hour sounded like a recipe for a minor diplomatic incident.

Just as you were sinking back into the warmth of sleep, your phone buzzed. Swearing, you groped for it blindly, hanging half-off the side of the bed. You answered it upside down. “‘Ello?”

“I'm assuming it's urgent,” said Ratchet's voice.

You held the phone a little farther from your ear—there was always an odd tonal humming when the Autobots answered the phone through internal comms. Normally, it didn't bother you, but the combination of it and the late hour was already giving you the beginnings of a headache. “Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you, I just--”

“I wasn't asleep. Did you need anything in particular?”

Ratchet didn't seem as irritated as you had been expecting; perhaps you hadn't committed as bad a faux pas as you had thought. Come to think of it, if the Autobots did sleep, the odds that Cybertron's diurnal period would match Earth's were slim at best. If they did, in fact, sleep. “I...had a thought.”
you said, pulling yourself all the way back on the bed and throwing the covers off your legs. "Kind of. I was half-asleep; I wasn't really thinking clearly, so—"

"And that thought was of course an estimate of how much time you could waste speaking without saying anything." Ratchet was moving around on the other end; you could hear the various clicks and scrapes of machinery nearby. Or perhaps that was Ratchet himself—just the sounds of him moving and breathing and being. It was soothing, somehow. The comm line hum buzzed, pulsing in the muscles of your jaw. "Go on, now."

You sighed. "Fine. Here's my thing. Wheeljack got here by following a radio signal Optimus sent from earth, right? He picked it up from all the way over outside the galaxy, he said."

"The human mind manages to amaze once again," Ratchet said dryly.

"Here's the thing, though." You drummed your heels on the floor, choosing your words carefully. "Radio waves travel at the speed of light in a vacuum. The nearest edge of the Milky Way is a hundred thousand light years away. Even if we assume there wasn't anything in the way and those radio waves held that speed throughout the entire journey, it would have taken literally tens of thousands of years for the signal to even reach that far out."

There was a pregnant pause. "Well. That's surprisingly astute of you. I'm assuming calling it 'magic' and asking you to go back to bed is out of the question?"

"Kind of," you said mildly. "Although I appreciate the Arthur C. Clark reference. You don't have to tell me anything, though. State secrets and all."

"And I'm sure you won't draw any conclusions of your own in the meanwhile." Ratchet sighed. "Fine. If only because I have a feeling you'll hate the answer just as much as I do."

That wasn't reassuring. "Quantum mechanics?"

"Worse. Theology."

You pulled the phone away from your head. "Uh. Excuse me?"

Ratchet chuckled sardonically. "You heard me. Trust me, it gets better. Has anyone explained the term 'Matrix' to you?"

"As in a collection of values?"


Something clicked in the recesses of your memory. "Wheeljack said that was what Optimus used to send the message. It's like a communicator?"

"This isn't going to work if you keep jumping to conclusions. Do you want me to explain this or not?"

"Sorry, Ratchet," you said, dutifully.

He harrumphed at you. "Do you know how spacebridges traverse long distances?"

"Not really," you admitted frankly.

He tutted. "Your education has been neglected. Ask me about it another day, perhaps we'll cover the
basics. For now, simply put, the spacebridge sends a signal that travels faster than the speed of light—"

No, it doesn't. One of the basic tenants of physics was that nothing—nothing—went faster than light. This wasn't a disagreement of philosophies; this was a blatant falsehood. You opened your mouth the call him out on it—

“—by traveling through a dimension where the constant of light is much faster than it is in our dimension.” Ratchet finished. He waited, no doubt for the impending meltdown.

You sat in the dark for a long, long moment.

“Did you fall back asleep?”

“No. No, I'm still here.” You slid out of bed and padded down the hall, phone tilted so that you could use it as a flashlight. You needed something warm to drink for this conversation. “Alternate dimensions, huh. Really?”

“Really.” Ratchet didn't sound any happier about it than you. “We can send a signal through an alternate dimension with encoded instructions to re-enter our continuum after a certain amount of time. Once the spacebridge receives the return signal, a link can be established.”

You opened the fridge. “Exactly how much of this are you dumbing down for me?”

“Mn. Most of it. Some of it is outright lying; mostly because I don't want to explain the actual science involved.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” You dug out the leftover chicken soup, considering exactly how much of a night time munchie you were in the market for. After some deliberation, you stuck the entire thing in the microwave. “So, why aren't all your communications done like this? You could talk to someone literally light years away in real time; that's huge.”

“Because it's also finicky. The equipment must be tuned to the most minute detail; otherwise, one's accuracy decreases exponentially with the distance. The farther you go, the more of a chance you have of opening the bridge into a solid object.” Ratchet sighed warily. “No materials on Earth can be relied upon for for than a few thousand miles by the local measurement. Local traffic only.”

You watched the chicken soup turn on the pedestal, illuminated in stark yellow. In the dark kitchen, it looked like a beacon. “Kay. So, the Matrix is like, better tuned for that?”

“Yes. And no. Keep in mind that this isn't its primary function, first of all. The fact that it can transmit signals it all is a side effect of its true purpose.” Ratchet sounded resigned; you wondered if you were coming up on the part he really disliked.

“Okay. What is it used for?” you asked, gamely.

“It's...supposed to be a conduit,” Ratchet said reluctantly. He paused. “Between the Prime and Primus.”

“'Primus'?”

“God.” Ratchet said shortly.

“God?”
“God. Did I stutter? God, yes. Or the closest thing to it.” Ratchet sounded well and truly sour. You had the vague impression you might be hung up on in a minute or two.

“That's...” You ran a hand over your scalp. You tried to think of something tactful to say. Nothing sprang to mind. “What the hell.”

“Yes. Well.” Ratchet grumbled. “That's what the scripture tells us. There's something on the other end, at the very least. Calling it a god feels a little like giving up, if you ask me, but Unmaker only knows the uproar the scientist who convinced poor Optimus to let me remove it for a clinical study would face. It's not killing him; and as his chief medical practitioner, I suppose I can be content with that.”

“Taken out of him?” Why is it inside of Optimus in the first place? You scrubbed your eyes. You should have waited until the morning. This was not a 2 AM conversation. “It...God, though? Seriously? Your people think Optimus can talk with your deity?”

“I know Optimus can talk at a being the Cybertronian religious organization has classified as a deity for generations,” Ratchet said firmly. “Don't romanticize it. Quantifiably, it's a very useful, very scary crystal lodged in my friend's torso.”

Belatedly, you took your soup out of the microwave. The bowl burned your skin; you didn't put it down. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You asked.”

You felt nauseous, all of a sudden. You were tired of knowing things—tired of friends whose lives you could destroy in twelve words or less, tired of understanding the consequences. You wished you could be harmless; that no matter what you did or what you said, the secrets would be kept. You thought of Cassandra, the prophet who had been cursed so that no one would listen to her prophecies. She got off easy. You sighed, and said, “I don't have to tell you why this information could complicate things for you.”

“Then I suppose this is one more secret for you to add to the pile, hm?”

Wonderful. The uneasy feeling in your stomach intensified. Maybe you wouldn't be having the soup after all. “Yeah. Okay. Just...you know not to, um.” You weren't sure how to articulate exactly how poor Ratchet's track record had been, lately. The thing with the requisitions office had been one thing; but this was...an entirely different level of 'complicated'. This was the kind of 'complicated' that had started wars. You had thought he was more cynical than this.

(Was this what had started this war?)

“Yes, yes, yes. I didn't tell you this for you to lecture me.” Ratchet grumbled.

“You told me all this in order to mess with me.”

“Only partially. I need you to understand that the Matrix is a tool. Too often is its presence taken as proof that the Prime is...” His tone darkened. “Infallible. Uncorruptible. Above the rest of us. Optimus is as guilty of this as the next person, although not quite in the way that you might think. The Matrix is the mark of a Prime; not the make of one.”

You still didn't understand why you were being let in on state secrets at two in the morning; but you didn't need an answer for everything. “Okay, Ratchet.”

“Don't you take that tone with me. Just keep it in mind. And go to bed, it's late. Humans sleep in
rhythms, not hours.”

You tried a spoonful of soup, chewing the vegetables mechanically. “You get some rest, too.”

His voice softened a fraction. “If I must.”

You said your good nights and rinsed your bowl. By the time you made it back to bed, you were already dozing on your feet. As you summoned the vague presence of mind necessary to plug your phone in and snuggle into the covers, it never occurred to you to double-check your phone's caller ID. In the morning—when you showed up at the base with a careful, gentle smile for Ratchet, who eyed you suspiciously—you would take it for granted that the conversation of last night was simply not something to talk about in daylight. In the grand scheme of your life, a single conversation was an easy secret to keep; easy enough that it could be done accidentally, even.

You wouldn't realize that the number that had called you back had not been Ratchet's.

…”

“I have good news and bad news, sir,” said Dr. Commons.

Somewhere else entirely, Commander Leland 'Silas' Bishop leaned back in his seat. The particularly unpalatable cup of coffee she had offered him went untouched—that was a real problem, with small groups like this. If you wanted anything more appetizing than MREs and army coffee, you either needed a guy, usually of the variety that also got disenchanted college students cocaine; or you needed someone legal enough to do the grocery shopping. Both of these things were, of course, much too convenient for MECH to have easy access to; and even if they were, Silas had the vague idea that Dr. Commons was the sort of person who would have rendered the coffee unfit for consumption anyway.

Instead, he nodded agreeably. “Sounds about on par for the last month. Very well, good news first.”

Dr. Commons leaned forward, bunching her chin on one hand as she flipped the folder in. Her curly hair was clipped regulation length, but strands of it had been missed in places, sticking up comically. “The good news is that we found the alien base.”

Silas blinked. That was startlingly good news, actually. That was the sort of news he usually had yelled across the room to him before the report ever landed on his desk. “Have we got positive identification?”

Dr. Commons snorted. One ink-stained hand flipped through a folder and pulled out a stapled sheaf. “Oh, do we ever. Those kids they had with them? All live within three miles of each other. Same with Fowler, no security or anything. One was even in the newspaper a few months ago—science project gone wrong.” She flipped through the packet and pulled out a clipping from the Jasper Monthly. “Unless you can think of another hollowed-out mesa within driving distance of Jasper, we've got the root of the infestation, sir.”

MECH, as a community, was divided on what they would do with the strangers that had come to this, the strange land MECH had sworn to purify. So many of Silas' man and women remained blind to the advantage alien tech could grant them. Silas might like to style himself an idealist; but he was also a man of the world. He had been in combat; ideals couldn't stop a bullet. Glory didn't staunch bleeding. If a little mechanical salvage was what it took to get the firepower MECH so desperately needed, then rubbing elbows with E.T. was a measure Silas could stoop to. At least for now. The future was vast, after all; and today's necessary evil was tomorrow's new campaign. Once Silas has cleansed his country, he would cleanse his planet.

Commons sighed. “The problem is that we don't have the manpower necessary to take them down. The base itself is an old one of ours—” She made a face. “Of the army's, that is. Virtually impregnable by our means. And there's no real way to launch a meaningful attack without attracting attention in Jasper; it's practically visible from the town square.

Silas held out a hand for the folder to skim the intelligence himself. Unfortunately, Dr. Commons was correct—even if they took the base, the losses would cripple them. Silas refused to spend his soldiers' lives on anything less than utter victory. Let alone the damage costs; it was like fighting trash compactors.

Besides, Silas wasn't overly fond of the idea of returning operations to the Jasper area. That town was a monument to everything MECH stood against--stagnancy, tradition, and the slow, senile creep of aging. Burning the place down would be cathartic, but ultimately more trouble than it was worth.

“So we keep to the shadows. For now.” Silas drummed his fingers, thinking. “They'll be guarding their liaisons closely, I suppose. Fowler, and two children?”

“Three. And some software developer who lives in town.” Dr. Commons rolled her eyes. "Civilians at every turn, sir. You'd think they'd be more selective."

“Mm. Keep an eye on all five. A distant eye, mind, but still.” Silas reconsidered the coffee, and ultimately set it aside. He wasn't that desperate. “Everyone wants something. I think it's time we found out what out mechanical friends are in the market for.”

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's wondering how much the reader character's phone bill is, the answer is: enough that Fowler had to get involved. No one is happy about this.
In 1877, astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli observed long lines across Mars' surface. He called them 'canali', meaning 'channels'. Although he himself did not surmise that these were literal constructed canals, this lead to the widespread theory of Martian waterways. When E.M. Antoniadi observed canali in 1909 under more favorable circumstances for viewing, he confirmed that canali were nothing more than optical illusions.

Happy St. Paddy's Day, folks! I hope everyone who celebrated with drinks stayed safe, everyone who celebrated without drinks had fun, and everyone who doesn't care about the holiday is having a very nice evening.
First off, check! It! Out! Ao3 user ArcaneAdvisor drew the Reader's late-night chat! Look upon them, in all their tired, messy-haired glory!
http://tickytakk.tumblr.com/post/183367006805/late-night-talks
You can find more more of their version of the Reader on their blog, tickytakk.tumblr.com, under the tag Felicity Gray!

This is a little bit of a shorter chapter, admittedly. The backlog is still, speaking frankly, nonexistent; and depending how things go, if I don't have something substantial in reserve by chapter 20, I'll probably take two or three weeks off to build it up again. If that happens, here's the head's up--this story's still on, nothing's on fire, we're all good. I'd rather not have to, though, so I'm going to do my best to keep it up.
And once again, thank you all. AA's Very Good Art really hammered it home that there are people? Reading this story? And liking it? Which, is of course, incredibly heartening. Not to get sappy in the notes (again), but thank you for reading. Y'all are great.

“How do I look now?”

You dutifully looked up from your computer. “Like a half-finished claymation doll, Ratchet.”

The holoform's doughy face screwed up in consternation. Off to the side, Arcee cackled.

To his credit, Ratchet had made incredible progress towards getting the holoforms to resemble an actual person, considering how long he and Raf had been working on it. The problem was that he had made significantly less progress than he thought he had. You had been more or less press-ganged into appraising each new iteration; although what made you more qualified to judge what did or didn't pass as human was beyond you. You weren't the only one who could drag their setup into the med bay to be interrupted every three minutes, surely.
“You said that earlier,” Arcee commented, amused. “You're starting to get repetitive. Branch out a little.”

You shot her a mildly dirty look. Out of the corner of your eye, you caught Ratchet scowling dourly at her. “Did you need something?” He snapped.

Arcee shook her head. “I'm enjoying the show. It's like a running commentary on different ways to say 'lumpen and ugly'.”

“I live to entertain,” you muttered. This was not your idea of a well-spent afternoon. It reminded you of waiting outside the changing room, forced to judge outfit after outfit while trying not to offend the other person too badly.

Ratchet, to your mild surprise, grunted in agreement. “Despite all appearances, we are actually trying to accomplish something today. Help or leave, pick one.” The holoform vanished with an anticlimactic fzzt, and the actual Ratchet braced himself on his elbows to scowl at Arcee. “I could have sworn you had training this afternoon.”

“I might've cracked a pillar in the training room.” Arcee leaned against the wall, arms folded. “Bulkhead kicked me out to that he could fix it. He says he's snagging some of the supports from the last shipment, by the way.”

“That's fine,” Ratchet grumbled. “Perhaps you might go help him, then.” He turned back to the console and brought up the model.

“Hard ban, sorry,” Arcee said unapologetically. “He set up the pitching machine by the door and everything. Apparently, I'm not a good assistant. I get antsy.”

You shot her another look over your laptop, wondering how an antsy Arcee rated on a scale from one to Miko. You frowned, as something occurred to you. You had only the vaguest idea what actually went on at military bases, but you were pretty sure standing around and harassing the medical personnel wasn't a thing. “Don't you have, like, drills to run, or something? Paperwork?”

“No during the daytime,” Arcee shot you look, like she thought you might be being stupid on purpose. “Organized drills happen under the cover of night. We’re never really off-duty, but we’re also never really on-duty, either. This is as close as we get to off-shift. Speaking loosely.” Arcee re-settled against the wall, the sharp parts of her back clicking together almost musically. “We've been at war for a long time, kid. Military discipline and sanity are a fine balance.”

In the distance, the muffled thoomp of explosions through several layers of reinforced walls echoed. The pipes rumbled as the sprinklers kicked on in another part of the base.

Ratchet swore in Cybertronian, softly for your benefit. “The irony is sickening. Arcee, conn. You, with me—don't sigh at me, you can finish that later.” He set off at a brisk pace.

“Just as a reminder—” You jogged to catch up. “This project that's been slowly eating my free time? This is literally something I'm doing at your request.”

“Yes, yes yes, very civic-mind of you. Keep up.” Ratchet rounded the corner at a power-walk; which was quite the pace when your legs were ten feet long.

The door to the loading bay was wide open, and filled with smoke. Ratchet waved you to a halt even as he quickened his pace. The low, soft humming of ventilation systems died as he leaned partway through the smoke. You wondered, anxiously, how long he could go without.
“Oh, you absolute moron,” Ratchet snapped, half-obscured. You sighed, relieved, as he stepped fully into the fumes, and re-emerged a few moments later with a bewildered-looking Wheeljack snagged by the upper arm. Wheeljack’s vents were streaming wisps of white smoke, still, but neither he nor Ratchet looked the worse for wear. "What did you do this time?"

Raf pattered to a halt behind you. “Ratchet--?”

“Stay back,” Ratchet snapped. “It's harmless, but I still don't want you breathing it in.”

Raf looked at you for further information. You shrugged at him.

Wheeljack re-engaged his vents with a heavy puff of white. "I know for a fact that wasn't the engine. If it was, that thing's got worse problems than a coolant leak."

"Perhaps," Ratchet muttered. He was peering int the room with something like exasperation downing on his face.

“Why am I here, again?” You called.

Ratchet waved at you in the universal sign for fuck off for a moment, I'm busy. “Raf, escort Wheeljack to the medbay, if you'd be so kind. For his own protection.”

“My what now?” Wheeljack eyed him sideways.


Wheeljack followed Raf out with the air of an adult humoring a very small, precocious child. Ratchet had already turned back to the smoke-filled doorway, scanning the air. “Do you carry a flu mask on your person?”

“No—hang on.” You searched your pockets. You had a bad habit of packing cargo pants down with all manner of theoretically useful things you never seemed to actually need. The sheer volume of the pockets was just intoxicating. “No luck, sorry. Why?”

“You hang back, then.” Ratchet strode back into the room. Curious, you ventured closer. The smoke wasn't smoke at all—it was, as far as you could tell, flour; only an ungodly amount of it. It had started collecting on the ground like snow; but there was still enough in the air to partially obscure your line of sight. As it began to settle, you were just beginning to make out the shape of a heavily dusted industrial fan sitting on the boarding ramp of the Jackhammer when Ratchet stood back up, holding someone human-sized and squirming in one hand.

Ratchet deposited Miko in front of you in a little puff of flour. “Deal with this,” he said, and turned on his heel. He power-walked away, a glance away from outright running. Coward.

“That's weird. So--oh.” When you glanced back at Miko, she was sprinting away.

A few dozen yards down the hall, she glanced back at you, still standing by the doorway. Slowly, the mad dash tapered to an awkward sort of slow jog; then, to a full stop.

One it was quite clear she was done running, you walked to catch up and clapped her lightly on the shoulder. “Heya, Miko.”

“...Hi.” She eyed you. She still had a surgical mask over the lower half of her face to keep out the dust; and her hair and skin were positively caked in flour. She looked like a hospital ghost from a low-budget horror movie.
“You, uh...” you glanced back at the white dust spilling out of the loading bay. “...What exactly are we trying to accomplish here?”

“Nothing,” Miko said. “I actually already got a pretty solid game plan. This is more like, just pure revenge, honestly.”

“I see,” you said, acutely aware of how much of the universe remained hidden from you. “And this revenge is on?”

“Wheeljack.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Made Bulkhead sad.”

You fought back your initial reaction; which was something along the lines of did he really, now.

“And did we check in with Bulkhead before planning this stroke of genius?”

Miko shifted. Her arms crossed over her shirt with a little white puff. “Technically, yes.”

“And he said no.”

“It was kinda ambiguous--”

“And he told you not to, Miko.” You crossed your arms over your chest, sighing. “You owe Wheeljack an apology. And you owe Bulkhead a bigger one.”

Miko wilted, scowling. You marveled at your ability to make people feel bad through sheer disappointment. This was what being an adult was, apparently. “I'm not going to lecture you. But I am disappointed, Miko.”

She grumbled something into her chest. You relented, feeling a bit like a heel. "Can you handle cleaning up all that on your own?"

Miko glanced back at the coating of white encroaching on the hallway. When she turned back, it was writ large on her face that she was considering another runner.

You held up a hand. “Let me call for reinforcements. You go get started, I'll be right there.”

“...Can't we just--”

“Nope. Forced labor builds character. I'll be suffering too, if it helps.”

She hesitated. “Are you gonna tell Optimus?” Miko asked, oddly plaintive.

This kid. “Miko, honey. There was literally an explosive noise. If he doesn't know already, we need to go make sure he's okay.”

She stalked back towards the mess, radiating outrage and misery. You wondered, vaguely, if you were ever that much of a piece of work. No--actually, you were quantifiably worse. Your grandmother would be howling with vindication right about now.

You sighed, and dialed the number. “Ratchet? Loading bay at your earliest convenience, please. Bring the holoform stuff.”

“Excuse me?” The phone line crackled—the humming seemed to have been fixed, but it had left
your phone with a weird echo. It was mildly irritating; but you were sure it wasn't serious.

“It's important, I promise.” You hung up, jogging over to the loading bay and retrieving a few brooms. You tossed one to Miko. She caught it with the air of an Edgar Allan Poe protagonist.

By the time you reached the doorway again, Ratchet had arrived. You hid the brooms behind the doorway. “Alright, what's--”

“Practical testing.” you said, straight-faced. “Holoform, please.”

Ratchet activated it. It gave you the most dubious look it could manage with facial features that resembled mashed potatoes. You grinned back and threw the broom. It bounced off his chest and into his arms.

Ratchet began sputtering in two-part harmony. “No—absolutely not, I have far more important things to do--”

“No, you don't ,” you said, with the certainty of one who has seen the truth and suffered because of it. “You were going to work on this thing the entire afternoon, is what you were going to do. We'll Put it through its, y'know, its cleaning paces, and if it stands up to the test, we know it can be used for small-scale tasks.”

One of the things you knew Ratchet was hoping these things could be used for was dexterous tasks; things his hands and tools were scaled too large for. He scowled at you, backed into a corner; and you smiled sweetly back.

If you weren't getting your work done, neither was he.

Chapter End Notes

Miko, sweeping flour: Cursed.
Reader: What's cursed?
Miko: Ratchet's holoform looks like if Mr. Clean melted, but with a clown wig.
Reader: ...That is cursed.
Planetesimals

Chapter Summary

Fragments of rock and ice orbiting a sun; gradually collected by one another's gravity to form a planet.

Chapter Notes

I have a tumblr: authorticity.tumblr.com! I thought I had put that up on here somewhere, but apparently, that was incorrect. I don't...do a whole lot over there, honestly; but if anyone wants to get into more direct contact with me, that's the place to go. Once again, thank you bertie for catching some more persnickety typos! As well as some less persnickety typos that I nonetheless missed.

“'Ey, kid.” Wheeljack poked his head through the entryway to the mezzanine. Sure enough, Miko and the tiny orange human were on their platform, crashed out on the couch. “You wanna help me make some bombs?”

Miko kept her head resolutely facing the television; but the other one—what was his name? Not Jack, the other one--peered over the back of the couch at him and nudged her. She nudged him back, face stoic.

Wheeljack had done an awful lot of damage control in his time. Explosions were cute when they were productive; but productivity to a scientist and productivity to a sponsoring noble wondering why their project wasn't being already done are very different things. Once Wheeljack had finally been ousted once and for all from the scientific community—the civilian one, at any rate—damage control had stopped meaning placating words and dumbed-down explanations, and started meaning razing the fragging ground. There was no way to know someone had stolen files or recovered P.O.W.s if the only thing left in their wake was a burnt crater.

Neither technique felt directly applicable here, but Wheeljack was nothing if not flexible. If Optimus wanted the tiny vengeful alien happy, Wheeljack would make the tiny vengeful alien happy. Somehow.

The tiny vengeful alien in question scowled at him, looking for all the world like she might snarl and snap at his hands if he tried to pick her up. There was a reason Wheeljack had stopped halfway across the mezzanine. “What kind of explosives?” she asked, as if the explosives had already failed to meet her standards.

“Just a weekend project,” Wheeljack said cheerily. “Some 4.3's—explodes on contact with liquids. Thought it might be sorta festive, given which planet we're one.”

“Ooh,” Miko said, snappishly cheery. “Sounds just up your alley, Raf. Why don't you go learn how to blow water up?”
“I'm actually gonna go do some stuff.” Raf made his way off the catwalk, ignoring the poisonous look Miko shot him. “Y'know. Some stuff for Ratchet. Ratchet stuff.”

Miko glared, looking like a trapped animal. This was...probably the absolute opposite of what Optimus had meant when he told Wheeljack to smooth things over. Never mind that Wheeljack literally didn't know how; it was all 'fix it, Wheeljack' and 'make amends, Wheeljack' in the land of people who knew how to talk to people.

(It was so much easier when he didn't have to care about slag like this.)

“Alrighty.” Wheeljack sat on the floor, pulling his kit out. “So this goes without saying, but don't, y'know, eat any of this stuff. Physical contact in general is also something you maybe wanna check in on first.”

Miko shot him a funny look. “We're doing this here?”

“Yeah?” Wheeljack looked around. The mezzanine wasn't in use—for once. The computer human was off at work; so even their usual spot was deserted.

“You aren't gonna, I dunno.” Miko approached warily, folding herself up to sit at the farthest point from Wheeljack possible. “Aren't you supposed to do this stuff under like, laboratory conditions, or something?”

“Eh.” The war had rapidly degraded Wheeljack’s sense of professional propriety. “Done more in worse places. We're gonna work on fuse mechanisms first; there's not a lot of damage we can do with those yet. You see those little wires? Need about fifteen of them twisted into loops.”

They worked in relative silence. Miko as a quick study; and despite the scowl she kept on her face, she was obviously catching the explosives bug. Maybe he hadn't done so bad after all. At least the kid was getting a life skill out of it.

Halfway through completing the blasting caps, Wheeljack cleared his throat and said, “So, uh. Speaking of Bulkhead--”

Without missing a beat, Miko yanked the wires out of the piece she was working on and hurled it at Wheeljack. “Knew it.”

“Ow.” It hadn't bounced off a particularly sensitive section of armor, but hopefully the illusion of effectiveness would discourage further attempts to hurt Wheeljack in other, less adorable ways. “Can't fix it if I don't know what I did, kiddo.”

“You don't want to fix it.” Miko snapped. “You just want me to leave you alone.”

“Either or.” Wheeljack could feel the aggression coming off the little human in waves. “Look, I don't know what's going on--”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“--But it's dragging the Pit out of the rest of the team. We're a small force; we can't go into combat being mad at each other. We either hash it out or we store it away; but this whole 'lingering grudge' deal? Not sustainable.” Miko was staring resolutely at the ground. “C'mon, kiddo. Talk to me.”

“You don't care,” Miko muttered.

“Think maybe I do, actually. If I didn't, the hour I spent cleaning flour outta my vents moved all this
a little higher on the priority list.”

Miko drew her knees up to her chest, staring sightlessly at the little stack of completed fuses. “You’re gonna leave, and Bulkhead's gonna miss you, and you don't care.”

Oh. Well.

Wheeljack stamped the flurry of old, fermented emotions about leaving and staying back into their box. “That's a long story, kid.”

“No, it's not!” Miko stood up and paced, arms swiping through the air to illustrate her point. “Once upon a time! You told us you were gonna leave, and Bulk's entire face just dropped. He looked like his dog just died, and you just kept talking like you didn't even notice. The end.”

Wheeljack hadn't noticed. It had been a long time since either he nor Bulkhead had been able to look each other in the optics while they said their goodbyes. Too much history. Too much hurt. Wheeljack might've been the one that roved; flittering in and out just long enough to count casualties and deliver news; but Bulkhead had left first.

Bulkhead had never been one to realize how much of an effect he had on people; how much of a calming influence he was. Without him—without someone there to laugh off the little stuff, bear the brunt of a good-natured joke, keep things sane—the Wreckers had self-destructed in a matter of joors. Wheeljack had long since made his peace with that—what had happened said more about the Wreckers as a unit than it did any one individual—but he still had to fight the familiar sting of panic at the thought of Bulkhead leaving; and everything falling apart all over again.

And Wheeljack wasn't what he considered an expert in psychological health; but those kinds of associations didn't seem healthy. Wheeljack could be a mess all he wanted in the privacy of deep space; but letting his weirdness bleed out all over Outpost Omega? No dice.

Bulkhead didn't need Wheeljack getting his issues all over him.

Which was all very well and good; except that it didn't exactly do to off load a century of emotional baggage and diverted PTSD onto some alien kid. No matter how angry said alien kid was. “It's complicated. Bulkhead and I've known each other for a long time, there. Lotta time to wrack up the grudges. S'not like I'm heading out forever, y'know?”

Miko stopped pacing. “You promise?”

Wheeljack didn't think he was up for lying. “...I can't. No one can. But—look at it this way. You ever hear about how people who have something to come home to make it back more? Having someone waiting for them keeps 'em going, or something. That's, like—that's me n' Bulk. We keep on going until the next time.”

“Or you could stay together, and keep each other safe that way,” Miko said, wheedling. “What if you actually die before you get to see him again? We'd never even know--”

“Not gonna happen,” Wheeljack said, firmly.

“But--”

“Not gonna happen, kiddo. I'd let you know. And that is a promise.”

Miko drew in on herself, reaching up to hide her face in her upper arms.
“Are, uh.” Wheeljack was *so bad at people.* “Are we good?”

“Are you still leaving?” Miko asked, voice muffled.

Wheeljack winced. “...Yeah.”

“Then no, we're not good! Jeez! I don't get why this is still a thing!” Miko snapped. “You're gonna miss Bulkhead! Bulk's gonna miss you! *Hello!*

“It's--”

“I don't care if it's *complicated,*” Miko snarled. “I don't know why you're *doing this to yourself!*

Wheeljack imagined it —staying, keeping a schedule, running drills and missions as part of a team again. No more lonesome stretches, like nights that went on and on and on; no more weighing risks knowing the nearest friendly face wouldn't have been able to launch a rescue even if they had known to. Staying would mean comforts, even a kind of safety; joors or even orns without being shot at, of resting and waiting and *thinking*--

He couldn't.

Wheeljack stood, gathering the materials with a few quick motions. “That's—just how it is, kid. I always come back, but staying? Not so much my speed.” His voice was steady, but he couldn't quite manage the casual note he had been hoping for. Time to wrap this up.

“But--” Miko stumbled as Wheeljack pulled the edge of the tray out from under her.

“Just how it is,” he repeated, and strode out of the room. He thanked his lucky stars the kid's legs were too short to follow him.

…

“Miko--? Aw, jeez.”

She didn't move.

Jack's footsteps tapped softly on the hardwood floor as he ventured closer. He hadn't taken his shoes off—an American thing. It was more efficient, less formal. Miko appreciated it, usually—it saved a lot of hassle.

If Jack had tracked dirt in her room, Miko was going to sweep it up with his *face.*

The bed creaked as he sat on the edge of it. “You, um. Want to talk about it?”

“*I don't want to talk about it.*” Miko said, into her pillow.

“I don't—I can't speak Japanese, Miko—”

”'Said *no,* Jack.”

“Oh.” Jack was silent for a long moment. After a second, a hand patted her gingerly on the back, as though he was afraid she might roll over and swipe at him.

Miko considered it; if only because she was tired of being tip-toed around. Maybe if she finally snapped, she thought dully, people would stop acting like she might go off at any second.
“You want me to get Bulkhead?” Jack asked.

“No.”

“...You want me to leave?”

She shook her head into the pillow.

Jack sighed, and settled more comfortably on the bed; and after a moment, she heard the tapping of a virtual keyboard. “Who're you texting?”

“Optimus.” Jack's jeans rustled as he put his phone away. “He said you kind of stormed out.”

Miko didn't want to talk about Optimus. Talk, listen, hear his side of the story—sure. Absolutely. As if anyone actually told Miko anything. Optimus was the sort of person people liked to actually say things to. He was big and safe and kind; and he had the power to actually fix things if he wanted to. Hell, he could order Wheeljack to stay on base, and the entire thing would be done with in five seconds.

“You want me to tell him anything?”

“Whatever.” Miko wasn't done being angry—at Wheeljack, Optimus, Arcee, the whole mess, herself—all of it. She'd make things up with them later. Maybe.

Jack fidgeted. “Don't you think you're being a little...”

“No. I'm not being a little. I'm being angry. I'm allowed to feel angry.” Miko rolled over, away from Jack. “If you're just gonna try to get me to feel bad for that, you can go.”

“Yeah, but—”

Miko growled into her pillow.

“Okay.” Jack sounded pretty miserable, too. “Sure.”

They sat in silence for a long time.

“...You wanna binge the Godzilla movies?” Jack asked, carefully.

“Dubbed?”

“I think my mom's just got the subtitled ones.”

“...Yeah. Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Meanwhile:

Reader: I'm having an oddly relaxing day today.
Stargazing

Chapter Summary

The act of observing the stars, with or without additional motive or equipment.

Chapter Notes

Actual stargazing? In a story literally tagged 'astronomy'? Doesn't sound plausible to me, folks.
The astronomy in this chapter is all actually fairly realistic. The way its explained here is more or less ripped off the sky tour at my local planetarium, if only because the fellow who runs it has a very succinct way of tying it all together. In theory, you should be able to identify all of these stars at the approximate time of year this chapter takes place in, as long as you're in the Northern Hemisphere and on about that side of the globe.
Once again, thank you to bertie for pointing out a particularly insidious grammar error. One day I'll get all of the typos and fixables out of a chapter before releasing it to a widespread audience, but that day was certainly not last week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As always, you continued to keep to your near-religious practice of not getting involved in drama, ever. That in mind, it wasn't exactly hard to guess from the energy that had suffused the Autobot base that the weirdness that had been simmering between Miko and Wheeljack had come to a boil. You weren't clear on the details—not that you'd asked too much, once it was clear everyone was alive and moderately okay—but apparently things hadn’t ended as happily as everyone had hoped. Miko was staying overnight with Jack and June, and Optimus—who seemed weirdly strongly regretful about the whole thing, although that could have just been his regular expression mixed with the stress of yet more superfluous interpersonal conflict—requested that she be given some space.
You had flashbacks to the last time the Autobots had assumed someone was upset; but you figured a night of fuming and monster movies would do Miko some good.

Bulkhead, on the other hand, had wilted. He had been determinedly ignoring the Miko-Wheeljack situation; possibly in hopes that they would somehow forget whatever beef they had with each other and go back to being friends on their own. Now that this plan had been neatly and succinctly shot, he was very obviously itching to do something. Miko was sequestered away, obviously, and no one seemed to know where Wheeljack had wound up; so he had taken to pacing around the base, looking for something useful to do.

“I will pay you fifty dollars to get Bulkhead out of here,” Arcee told you flatly.

“Me?” You blinked. She had spent the entire afternoon doing some sort of martial arts forms, an ugly scowl on her face. You weren’t entirely clear on her part in all this, but it was obviously bugging her. It was nearly evening, now; and you wouldn’t have been surprised if this was the first anyone had heard from her in hours. “I mean—shouldn't it be you, or Bee, or someone?”
“I’m too connected. And Bee’s sweet, but wise council isn’t really his thing. When it comes to calming people down, you’re the human we want, trust me.”

That would be flattering if the runners-up hadn’t been an over-caffeinated government official and a handful of teenagers. “What do you want me to do? Take him bowling?”

Arcee looked at you as if you were an idiot. “What is the single thing you do, each and every night?”

“...Software development?” Putting up with Ratchet’s guff? Pretending your life still made sense?

“Cute. Take him stargazing, genius. Teach him some local constellations, that sort of thing.”

You grimaced. “I don’t think he’d be interested, but I guess.”

“One sec.” Arcee stood up from where she’d been leaning against the wall. “Bulkhead!”

There was a moment of silence.

“Yeah?” Bulkhead said, somewhere deeper in the base.

“The stargazing human wants to take someone along tonight! You in?”

Another long pause. You mouthed ‘stargazing human?’ in Arcee’s direction. She flapped a hand at you dismissively.

“...Yeah, sure.” Bulkhead said, significantly less than enthused.

“There. Problem solved.” Arcee gestured at you. “Good?”

“Good,” you said, for lack of any other options. You weren’t sure about being volun-told to participate in this, but as these things went, being press-ganged into cheering someone up wasn’t the worst that could happen.

…

“I dunno if this is gonna be a one-night project.” Bulkhead muttered, about an hour in. You’d made good progress—meaning that he was speaking in whole sentences, instead of morose grumbles. “It, uh, it takes a while for things to work their way through my thick helm, y’know?”

You had picked a good spot. Bulkhead had enough room to park; leaving you free to perch on his roof, occasionally laying back to peer, upside down, at the Northern sky. The sky were clear, the horizon was relatively undisrupted, and life was good.

Now, if you could get Bulkhead to stop treating every misstep like a moral failure on his part, you’d be good to go.

“The stars aren’t going anywhere.” You suppressed the urge to call out his self-deprecation with an effort. Letting that sort of thing go by made your skin crawl just a little bit; but you weren’t his keeper. You quieted the aggressively supportive voice in your head, and focused on teaching. “You want to take it from the top?”

“...Sure. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” You said easily. “I tried to teach June this stuff, once—that’s Jack’s mom—and she just started laughing at me after a while. You’re a much better student, trust me. What’s the first thing we look for in the sky?”
“Big—it’s the Big Dipper? Heard there was two Dippers.”

“Right. Follow the line of the two stars opposite the handle up to?”

“The...the star the over the North Pole—”

“Polaris, right. See, you got this!” You cheered.

“Can’t even get the names straight.” Bulkhead’s tone was sour with the ache of long repetition. You wondered how much of this was things he had been beating himself up over for years. The voice that sounded like your grandmother at her most forcefully optimistic redoubled its efforts.

Instead, you said, “The stars don’t care what we call them. So, next we look for—”

“Orion.” Bulkhead said immediately.

“Yeah!”

“Yeah, that one's a gimme. Then it's bell...Bella--?”

“Bellatrix. Wrong shoulder, though. You’re thinking of the star Betelgeuse. Like the movie?”

“Haven't seen it.”

“Honestly, neither have I.” You sat back up, stretching. “Sounds pretty much square in Miko's wheelhouse, though. Orion is accompanied by...”

“Uhh...Aw, fraggit.”

“It's okay.” You said as reassuringly as you could manage. “So, off to the side is Canis Major and Minor. Sirius is the really bright star. No, that looks like a planet. Over there. Canis Minor is kind of above it.”

“...Is that supposed to be—y'know what, sure. That can be a dog. Kinda.”

“Technically, Canis Minor only has the two stars in it. The others are in the star quadrant, but they aren't part of the constellation itself.”

“Primus. So which one's...Procyon?”

“Got it in one. Honestly, I don't remember. They're close enough together that I'm fine with fudging it, though, the asterism works anyway. You want me to look it up later?”

“Nah. So, Procyon, Polaris, and...uh, hold on—”

You waited.

“...Fraggit.”

“You're fine.” You said, firmly. “That's Betelgeuse. So those three together make up the Winter Triangle.”

“...Huh.”

The two of you sat in silence for a few moments. Above you, the stars turned.

“Y’know, always kinda thought it’d be more complicated than this.” Bulkhead said, dreamily
bemused. The late night and the open skies were getting to him. There was something about stargazing that made people talk a little more—like sleepovers, you thought. “Like, I’d need classes and slag before I’d even get this far.”

You considered trying to drive the conversation towards today's drama. “I mean, you can.” You said, instead. There was a time for solving problems, and there was a time for sitting and enjoying the sky with a pal. “I can send you some links on calculating distances and stuff, or finding out how old a star is, but it doesn't have to go that far. Sometimes it's nice to just...watch them. Restful. It's easy to see why people made up stories about them.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Mm.”

You sat in silence for a long moment. Bulkhead hummed underneath you—the familiar background cadence of aliens.

“...Hey. You uh, you moved here from across the continent, right?”

“It—well, kind of.” You stuttered, taken aback at the turn of conversation. “The east coast. Way north of here, actually. I can’t tell you how weird it was having to adapt to seeing Polaris so close to the horizon. Why?”

“Just wondering. You get snow?”

“Yep.”

“You miss it?” He pressed.

“...Honestly?” You realized you were kicking your heels against Bulkhead's side window and stopped. “Not really. I didn't mind it so much, but it's kind of a pain. I was never the sort of kid who really liked to play in the snow. All my time outside was either looking up at the sky or spent searching for aliens.”

“Seriously?” Bulkhead snorted.

You grinned in the darkness. Finally, you were getting somewhere. “Hey, you never know. The truth could've been out there. Also, I was super young. I nearly moved to Roswell, actually. What irony that would've been.”

“Yeah.”

“...Did you get snow on Cybertron?” You ventured, after a second.

“Nah.” Bulkhead said, fondly. “Didn’t get cold enough, even at the poles. Besides, our atmospheric moisture had a higher freezing point than yours. Pretty as slag, though. Used to rain in greens and purples.”

“That sounds...amazing,” you said truthfully.

“Yeah.” There was a wistful quality to his voice. “Kinda. The rain itself was a little…”

“Dreary?”

“Nah. Well, yeah, but that wasn't the problem. It was more that it was just highly corrosive.”
“That…wow.” you said, lamely. That didn't sound like the kind of environment that could evolve complex life, but who were you to judge? “That seems...bad.”

“Yeah, you're telling me. It wasn't always like that.” Bulkhead's voice darkened. “Used to be that you could sit in a downpour and the worse'd you get was a ruined paint job. It was engineered.”

“Engineered?” You yelped, and immediately regretted it.

“It...” Bulkhead sighed. “The first resistance, before this war, it was mostly bots from low-income housing. There were a few middle-castes with their eyes open—Optimus' crowd, even back then—but the main crowd of us were in the lower levels. The irrigation was—well, technically the lower levels were where the rainwater got irrigated to. Most of us were used to slogging our way through a few inches after a good storm.”

You reeled. You imagined civilians, families, stepping out into the streets after a storm none the wiser, and... “That...whole districts? They might as well have dropped bombs.”

“He. Depends on the bomb.” Bulkhead laughed, humorlessly.

“...Was this the Decepticons?” You reached out and patted Bulkhead's roof. He hummed a little stronger in response.

“Nah. Worse. This was the old government system, the Functionists.” His voice faltered, like he'd snapped out of a reverie. “I, uh. I don't wanna talk about them.”

“You don’t have to. More star stuff?” You asked, determinedly level.

“...Can we just watch 'em for a bit?”

“Sounds good.”

Chapter End Notes

Reader: So why is the constellation Orion easier to remember?
Bulkhead: No reason.
Chapter Summary

The ТП-82 was a triple-barreled gun carried by cosmonauts into space. The Soviet pistol was issued as a response to the experiences of cosmonaut Alexei Leonov. After having been stranded in the Siberian wilderness after re-entry, he feared that recovering spacefarers, armed only with the 9mm pistol already provided would not stand against the common predators of the area, such as wolves and bears. Soviet Cosmonauts continued to go into space armed, knowing that although they would survive space easily, the same could not necessarily be said upon returning to their home planet.

Chapter Notes

The seeds we started this year sprouted! The garden is officially underway; and with it, the weekend has grown exponentially more hectic. Although this will (probably) not affect the posting schedule itself, chapters might end up going up on Saturday or Monday.

Thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You're kidding.”

“Swear to god.” You curled up in the driver's seat, feet tucked up against the edge of the seat. You had been steadily chipping away at the pall that had descended over the two of you with stories about growing up with your dad and grandparents, about your mother's travels and the wonderful things she told you about. The deep chuckles that occasionally switched to amused little ree-ree-ree sounds were a well-won reward. You hadn't heard a Cybertronian laugh before, but it was surprisingly cute. You had been expecting more eardrum-piercing hellnoises.

Bulkhead snorted. “I'm calling you out. There's no way your gramps screwed up that badly.”

“Nope. We were in New Zealand, Mom was in New Hampshire, and we were both expecting each other to pick us up at the airport. It was nuts.” You squinted, trying to remember. “I think I was like eight? My main emotion at the time was the desire to see a kiwi. I was a simple child.”

“Was your gran mad?”

You snorted. “Nah, she knew who she married. She spent the entire week teasing him, though.”

“Yeah. You'd think a NASA scientist'd be a little better at planning a flight.”

You blinked. “Pfft. Actually, it's just my gran who does rocket math. My Grampa was a janitor. That's how they met, actually, he helped her rewrite some equations some idiot erased as a joke. Real romance novel-level stuff, trust me. They're nauseating together.” You smiled fondly.
Bulkhead had gone quiet. “A scientist and—a janitor? Like, the cleaning crew?”

“...Yeah?”

“And they've been together, uh…?”

Something about the way he said it made you pause. “Over fifty years. Probably going on sixty, now. Why?”

“No reason,” Bulkhead said quickly. “Just, uh. Just nice to hear, that's all.” There was a smile in his voice that you didn't quite understand. “S'just nice.”

“Okay.” You wouldn't open another can of worms tonight if someone paid you, but it was nice that he was happy. “It was a fun time, though. My mom went to a bunch of different New England Landmarks and called us. I'm pretty sure she broke into Fort Williams Park after hours, it was nuts. I think we spent more in long-distance calls than we did plane tickets, but we had a blast. Also, my mom's a pharmacist.” You shrugged. “She could have chartered a plane herself if she wanted to. I think everyone just wanted to tease my Grampa.”

“Aww. Sounds like a real--”

Bulkhead swerved violently, and you cracked your head on the window. “Ow! What?”

“Didja see that?” Bulkhead said, tensely. You peered out the windshield. In the distance, the lights of Jasper were a blurry web on the horizon; and the taillights of some large pickup truck were fading rapidly into the night. Off to the side, you could make out the unlit shape of the Wen's Diner.

“I don't see anything.” You sat back, heart pounding. “Decepticons?”

“Nah.” Bulkhead started to accelerate. “That Chevy that just passed us? Something flew outta the window and hit a walker.”

If you squinted, you could just barely, barely make out the outline of something by the side of the road. It wasn't moving. “Oh my god.”

Bulkhead slowed to a halt next to the figure, and you jumped out almost before the door was fully open. You flicked the flashlight widget on your phone, and hissed. “Jesus. It's Mr. Callighan.” You checked for a pulse, hands shaking.

He twitched, as you laid a hand on his shoulder to turn him over, and groaned something in Russian. You glanced at Bulkhead, helplessly.

“I've got it.” Bulkhead answered in Russian, and Mr. Callighan relaxed. His eye fluttered open, squinting in the LED light. “Ah. Good evening.”

“Hi, Mr. Callighan,” You said calmly, trying not the collapse into tears. “How're you feeling?”

He raised a hand to touch the side of his face in a shockingly swift movement. His fingers came away bloody. “Hmm. Chipper.”

You stopped him from sitting up. “I'm-I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to keep you from moving around too much.” It had been literal years since your mother had sat you down and shown you how to use a first aid kit, and you weren't sure if you trusted your memory.

“Keep 'em still and quiet,” Bulkhead confirmed. “Head elevated. I did some reading. Miko keeps us
on our toes, y'know how it is.”

“Makes sense.” You wriggled out of your sweater and bunched it under his head. It occurred to you that you had well and truly succeeded in distracting Bulkhead. Good job, you.

"Why," Mr. Callighan asked, fascinated. "Were you wearing a sweater in the desert?"

"It's fifty-something degrees out here," Bulkhead said, sounding offended on your behalf.

"I see. I beg your pardon."

You mouthed what are you doing at Bulkhead. He rumbled uneasily.

"What time is it?" Mr. Callighan asked you.

"Half-past ten," Bulkhead said automatically, and winced, hunching down on his shocks.

“What curiously helpful hallucinations I am having tonight,” Mr. Callighan murmured.

“Yeah, he's a winner.” You checked the horizon for the ambulance. You'd take Ratchet at this rate.

“Someone's coming,” Bulkhead said, suddenly. You whipped around.

Mr. Wen appeared out of the shadows, dressed in an old-fashioned dressing gown and sandals. “Is everything alright?” He called, slowing from a run to a trot. “Is everyone—my god, Misha!”

Mr. Callighan groaned. “I think I would like to be knocked unconscious again.”

Mr. Wen took a few faltering steps closer, hands outstretched. His face looked gaunt and pale in the harsh light, wide eyes fastened on Mr. Callighan. “What--”

“Happened?” snapped Mr. Callighan. “I wanted a nap in the middle of my night-time walk, of course, and I invited our young neighbor and their lovely speaking truck to join me. What did you imagine, Harry?”

Mr. Wen puffed up indignantly, face reddening to a dark gray among the shadows. “Now listen, you sarcastic old cuss--”

You recovered from Misha and Harry, respectively. “Someone threw something from their car and hit him, Mr. Wen. We're waiting on the ambulance now.”

“Who’s the second gentleman?” Mr. Wen muttered, but he sat on the edge of the asphalt anyway fidgeting mightily. He kept glancing at Mr. Callighan out of the corner of his eye.

You sat in near silence for a few minutes. Occasionally, Mr. Wen would snip something pointed at Mr. Callighan, apparently as a sort of strange alternative to asking him questions to make sure he was still alert. They would go back and forth, occasionally lapsing into Chinese and Russian, which Bulkhead discreetly translated through your phone; as you struggled to keep a straight face. Why did these sweet old men hate each other so much?
To your great relief and mild disappointment, the familiar lights of the Jasper County Police Car tore out of the mass of lights on the horizon and screeched to a halt on the other side of the road. Officer Rosa Hernandez, a sheer wall of a woman around your own age, maneuvered herself out of the squad car and ran over, flashlight in hand. She looked like a linebacker; accept you knew she wasn’t wearing hefty football gear, so on a case-by-case comparison, she would have dwarfed a linebacker.

You turned your phone's flashlight off, as the light from hers eclipsed it. “Is everyone alright?” she called, surprisingly softly.

“No,” Mr. Callighan said, cheerfully. “I am not. Wen's here, you see. I have also been hit on the head, but I feel that's less pressing.”

Rosa turned to you with the air of a woman desperately hoping she wasn't going to have to interpret a statement from a flurry of less-than-veiled insults.

You outlined the situation, omitting nothing except Bulkhead. Mr. Callighan chimed in occasionally from the ground, as Mr. Wen's face got redder and redder from the effort of not insulting into an injured man.

Rosa wrote it down, dutifully, casting an unimpressed eye at the two of them. “The ambulance should have been here by now. If they don't show in five, I'll call for an ETA.”

“Please,” you said, relieved. She smiled, and patted your shoulder with a perfectly manicured hand the size of a catcher's mitt. Her nails had little flowers on them.

Your phone buzzed. I like her, said Bulkhead's text, with the cheese emoji. You grinned. Rosa was in the same general category as June—competent, sweet, and a complete disaster. You had watched her walk into a stop sign and nearly keep going.

Rosa did wind up having to call the hospital—apparently wires had gotten crossed, and the ambulance had been sent to the wrong place. Rosa had stopped, met your gaze, and asked, “I beg your pardon, but may I speak to Dr. Darby?”

Five minutes later, an ambulance rolled up, bearing a gurney and some very humble apologies.

Mr. Wen and Mr. Callighan kept sniping at each other while the paramedics did their work; to the point where one of them had to stop Mr. Wen from following them onto the ambulance. Mr. Callighan and Mr. Wen both glared at the poor paramedic, as though frustrated at the interruption; then accidentally met each other's gaze and looked away.

“Madre dios,” Rosa muttered above your ear. You snickered.

Rosa took your statement and wished you a good night; and once the ambulance and the squad car had both faded into the lights of Jasper, you climbed behind Bulkhead's wheel.

You sat in exhausted silence.

“So, uh.” Bulkhead said at last “Are all old folks like that?”

You snorted. “Nah, just them. And also my Grandma. But they're a special case.”

“That's somethin'.” He sighed. “Gotta call this in. Boss won't be happy I talked to what's-his-face, the mean one.”

“He had a concussion, you're probably fine.” You thought, anyway. Truth be told, there were a lot
of things about tonight you were going to lose sleep over. “And he's normally sweet as pie. You didn't catch the license number of that truck, did you?”

“Nope. Sorry.”

“No worries.” You let your head tip back to rest against the seat. “Hey, Bulkhead?”

“Yeah?”

“Sorry tonight's been a bit of a bust.”

“You kidding?” Bulkhead snorted. “I learned a whole three constellations. And I got to meet the famous restaurant crazies. S'practically a red letter day.”

You appreciated his spin on it, at least. “Yeah. Thanks for helping, by the way.”

“Didn't do much, but sure. You seemed to have pretty good handle on it.”

“Oh. Huh.” You glanced at your hands. They were still shaking. “Yeah, I'm actually probably going to collapse in a puddle once I crash? But that's kind of you to say.”

“...Let's, uh. Let's get you home.”

The outer reaches of Cybertron's solar system were delightfully cold and wet; the perfect growing conditions for the odd slime or the newest unique bacteria. Airachnid considered herself, to put it mildly, a fan. Her hobbies were't all glam and glitter, after all; there was value to be found in even the smallest rarity. Snow, for example; she loved snow. Billions of designs, each seen one one person and one only. she could spend years in snow.

But there were mundanities; and then there were life's happy accidents, the times the cards fell just right for her to discover a treasure trove where she had expected only banality. Here, on the far side of Cybertron’s sister planet, Caminus—this was what she called unique.

Airachnid dared to skitter closer, ventilations visible in the cold air. In front of her, a massive biodome filled with colors rose out of the fog, revealing the familiar lights of Cybertronian traffice weaving in golden threads.

Here was the lost colony of Caminus. Here was a true rarity.

Airachnid wanted it.

It had been a mistake to come here.

Ultra Magnus stepped carefully through the rubble, trying to ignore the display on his HUD that reknit the broken pieces into a building. The Hall of Records had been one of the few buildings plied with actual bombs; rather than chemical weaponry or police force. If the Council could not have the wonders of the past, they had reasoned; neither could anyone else. Ultra Magnus remembered delivering to the new Prime himself. There were certain tasks that stayed with you, no matter how necessary they were.

He had to wonder—was this truly what the Autobots were reduced to? Scavenging like animals, even here? It seemed wrong to ask more of this place, especially after it had given so much. It was
necessary; but it was not right, when this place had served for so many years as a center of learning, of culture and commerce—

(--as a home--)

Ultra Magnus breathed deeply, and resumed searching for the lock that would allow him access to what was left of the lower levels. The rain would have ruined everything on the surface, but there was hope that something might be salvaged from deeper in.

Some tasks were necessary, after all. No matter how long they would stick with you.

Chapter End Notes

Here's a fun fact: the Reader character was the only person present in this scene who is less than multilingual. Mr. Wen speaks Chinese, English, and a smattering of Russian; Mr. Callighan speaks Russian, English, and a little bit of Chinese; and Rosa speaks English, Costa Rican Spanish, and a tiny bit of Maleku. Bulkhead can understand all the languages included in the atmospheric package; which is to say, a lot of 'em.
Cold War

Chapter Summary

Non-combative dispute between the United States of America and the Soviet Union; in which both nations held power over the other, thereby that neither could attack without perishing themselves. As bitter a truth as it is, this climate of fear and anxiety helped spur the space race to its zenith, culminating in the first human presence on the moon. One of mankind’s most prominent achievements was prompted by its most primitive emotion: paranoia.

Chapter Notes

It's still Sunday where I am! I'm not late! I swear!
This chapter was brought to you by: an awful lot of gardening. The first three dialogue drafts happened purely in my head while I was pulling last year's kale out of the ground. This is also my excuse for why the chapter turned out so late in the day; but it probably would have been very different if I hadn't had all that brainstorming time.

There was a knock at the door.

Jack had to blink his eyes away from the screen. He and Miko hadn’t quite exhausted his mom’s collection of bad monster movies, but they were certainly at least three or four deep by now. They were hypnotically similar; and once the sun went down, there wasn't any reliable way to tell time. He groaned, disentangling himself from the pile of blankets with some difficulty. “Don't bother pausing it.”

“Mm—what?” Miko scrubbed her eyes with a palm, yawning. Jack realized with a start that she’d been quiet for hours. He wondered if she'd dropped off.

Jack stood up, narrowly avoiding stepping in the popcorn bowl. “Someone’s at the door. I'll be right back.”

Miko shrank back into the blankets, hissing at the door like an angry cat. “Nope.”

“Seriously?” He nudged the blanket pile she had wrapped herself with with a toe. “Y’know, pretty sure if an Autobot was going to knock, the door would be, you know. No longer a functioning door.”

She pulled the edge of a sheet over her head like a hood, glaring at him as he passed. “They could be using that new hologram thing.”

Jack stepped around her. “Yeah. Because that’s definitely low-profile enough to use in Jasper. Just try not to, like, traumatize the late-night Jehovah's Witnesses or anything, okay?”
“Jehovah’s what?” Miko shot him a weird look.

“Good enough.” He opened the door.

Moira Wen lowered her fist, inches from accidentally knocking on Jack’s forehead. “Sorry. What’s up, dude?”

Her sister waved from over her shoulder. “Hi Jack!”

“Hey, Maive.”

The infamous Wen sisters smiled at him, in unison. Jack bit back a groan. He liked the Wen sisters well enough—as far as kids relatively close to his age went, at least—but now was literally maybe the worst time possible. “Uh. Hey. Listen, if you guys are gonna, like, toilet paper the house or whatever, can you be quiet enough about it that I can pretend not to know until tomorrow? We’re kind of having some drama.”

“Yeah, we know.” Maive craned her neck to see into the house. Her face lit up when she spotted the amorphous lump of fabrics sitting in front of the sofa. “Miko! Hi!”

Miko peeked around the couch. “Dude, seriously? It’s like ten!”

Moira stepped back in front of Maive, smiling distressingly diplomatically. “We’re here to ask a favor, actually. Then we’ll get out of your way.”

“From him?” Miko asked incredulously.

“From me?” Jack bit back a curse. He was going to be blackmailed. He didn’t even have anything to be blackmailed with, and he was going to be blackmailed.


“Oh.” Jack didn’t feel all that reassured, oddly. “How’d you know she was here, again?”

“Magic.” Moira cleared her throat, shifting from foot to foot. “Can we come in, or?”

Jack stepped aside. Maive gave him an oddly consoling pat on the shoulder as she passed.

“How’s Sierra?” Moira asked, in the tone of someone making small talk against their will.

“No idea.” Jack hadn’t seen her in about...wow, three weeks. It was almost like he had way more important things to be doing with his free time than high school weirdness. “What’s up?”

The sisters exchanged a glance. Maive dropped to the floor and picked at a corner of the blanket Miko was still wrapped in. “Scooch.”

Miko scowled, but obligingly moved over so that Maive could curl up underneath the blankets with her. Moira sat cross-legged on the carpet across from her. “Feel free to have a seat, Jack.”

Seeing as it was, in fact, his own house, Jack did.

Before she could speak, the door slammed. A moment later, Jack’s mom poked her head in. “Jack? Are you still—oh, gosh. Hello, girls.”

“Hi, Dr. Darby,” Moira said. “Dad says thanks again for your help tonight.”
She waved a hand. “Don’t mention it. I don’t know what the hospital was thinking, honestly.” June turned to Jack. “Is everyone staying over, or…?”

“No, just Miko.” Maive shrugged. “We just wanted to check in, and to say thanks again. We’ll be heading home in a few minutes.”

“Mm.” June looked unimpressed. “When you’re ready to head back, give me a call. I’ll give you a ride.” She disappeared down the hall.

The Wen sisters listened to the sound of her footsteps fading.

“Your mom is seriously nice,” Moira said.

“So I’ve been told.”

“So this has been fun,” Miko said. “Any time you wanna spill though. Like, don’t hold back on our account.”

Maive made a face at her. “You guys know Mr. Callighan?”

“ Heard of him once or twice,” Jack said dryly.

“Yeah. So apparently some prize specimen threw a glass bottle at him from a truck window earlier tonight,” Moira said, cheerily. “Right outside the diner, in fact.”

The room went still.


“Mm.” Maive huddled under the blankets. “Yeah. Fortunately, someone was driving by—the person next door to here, actually.” She jerked her head in the direction of Jack’s more interesting neighbor's house. “They called 911, Dad saw their headlights, and…” she shrugged, trailing off. “Lucky, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Jack said, weakly. He felt like his stomach was trying to crawl around the back of his spine. “Lucky.”

“But it’s weird,” Maive went on, falsely cheerful. “Because last we heard, they hadn’t bought a new car yet.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Miko sit up in her blanket nest.

So did Maive. “Which makes the dark green SUV they were driving...” She glanced at Moira. “A curiosity.”

“A conundrum, perhaps,” Moira offered.

“Yup.”

“Huh,” Jack managed, trying desperately to sound casual. “Weird.”

“Yeah.” Moira nodded. “So then we were like, that’s super lucky, you know? That coincidence has to be...”

Maive grinned. “Astronomical.”
Jack and Miko stared at her. Moira heaved a long sigh.

“It’s—y’know, because they like stars, and...y’know, never mind.” Maive crossed her arms. “Whatever.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Moira un-subtly shoved at Maive's side with her foot.

“Wh—oh. Yeah. So it’s just, um, lucky. Like, an unlikely thing happening next to an unlikely thing. That sort of...of thing.”

“Yes,” Moira said, apparently intent on keeping the ball rolling while she still could. “It would be a real tragedy of that sort of highly implausible thing were happen in favor of someone less savory.”

“Uh,” said Miko. “What are you even talking about?”

Maive snorted. "Beats me."

“Nothing, really,” Moira said, aiming another kick at her sister directly across Jack's line of vision. “Only that if the two unlikely events were related, well--” she shrugged. “The other truck got away. This truck—what was it?”

“Dark green SUV,” Maive repeated.

Jack heard Miko smother another curse in Japanese.

“Right. This truck, we know where to find. We could even let other people know where to find the truck, even.” Moira leaned back. “As well as a few other mildly interesting factoids, as well.”

Jack realized, with a sickening lurch, that he wasn’t the one being blackmailed.

Miko stood up. “Okay, so today sucked. Like, if I were gonna pick one night where it was bad, in particular, for someone to try and start a thing? This would be the night. Like some kinda anti-blackmail holiday.”

“Blackmail?” Moira rested her chin in her hands. “Are we talking about blackmail?”

“I didn’t think we were talking about blackmail,” Maive mused.

Moira started to say something—to continue their little script, to psych them out and warn them off, or whatever it was they were aiming for—but Jack stood up before she could speak. “No,” he said, slowly, making a decision while his mouth was moving. What the hell was he doing? “We’re not talking about blackmail. We're talking about...about family.”

(What the hell was he even doing?)

Moira’s mouth closed with a snap. “Excuse me?”

“Your...” Jack honestly didn’t know what to call Mr. Callighan relative to the Wen family. “One of your people was hurt. You think that since something, um. Something else was going on, other people won’t be able to protect them as well as you can. We get that, believe me.”

“Yeah.” Miko wrinkled her nose. “Dealing with stuff that’s bigger than we are is kind of our thing.”

Jack nodded “So trust us when we say that our people didn’t do this. It actually was a coincidence, and they really did just want to stop and help.”
The Wen sisters exchanged a glance. “Your people?” Moira asked, pointedly.

“Yeah.” Jack maintained eye contact. “Our people.”

There was a long pause.

“Can you just tell us?” Maive asked, plaintively. “I feel like we’re using words with a lot of charged meanings, and it’s getting a little weird.”

“Well, uh.” Jack dropped his gaze, fighting self-consciousness. “That’s, um, that’s not happening. But yeah, it’s getting weird.”

Moira’s mouth quirked. “Okay.”

“Well?” Maive leaned over to make eye contact.

“Okay.” She climbed to her feet. Maive struggled out of the blanket cocoon. “We’re glad we got this cleared up. We’ll let you get back to your robots.”

Jack eyed the robot wreaking havoc on a model of San Francisco, and quietly prayed Miko wouldn’t choke at the last second.

“And, um.” Maive shifted. “This is… also a little weird to ask, but if... your people could do anything to keep our people safe? That’d be... nice of them.”

“We’ll see,” Miko said, flatly.

The Wen sisters exited. Jack listened, as the sounds of them chatting with his mom moved from the hallway to the garage, before fading behind the door.

Miko flopped backwards. “What the shit.”

“Yeah.” Jack rubbed his temples. If Arcee didn’t kill him, Ratchet just might finish the job. “Think they’re gonna tell anyone?”

“Nah.” Miko made a face. “Those two have dirt on, like, the entire town. What I wanna know is how much they do know, y’know? Like, I know you guys were having a little spy moment with the code words and stuff, but they were actually talking on pretty vague terms.”

Jack sighed. The Wen sisters always seemed to be everywhere and know everything; but he mightily suspected that was because he worked for Mr. Callighan and they wanted to weird him out. “No one two years younger than us should be that scary.”

“Hello?” Miko poked him. “We hang with Raf. He’s like eleven, and like, if there’s one dude in Jasper who could hack the Pentagon? It’s him.”

“He’s thirteen. Fair point.” Jack tilted his head back to state at the ceiling. “My neighbor’s good with tech. They could probably do it.”


“Yeah.” The remote was on the rug in front of him. Jack un-paused the movie. On the screen, the aluminum robot resumed falling into power lines, like a dancer waiting for their cue. “Hey, Miko?”

“‘Sup?”
“What’re we gonna do?”

Miko pulled the blankets back over her shoulders. “We do what we need to, I guess. Whatever that is.”

“Mm. Miko?”

“What, Jack.”

“Did they steal the popcorn bowl?”

Miko looked around. “...Yup.”

“Just checking.”

Bulkhead rolled into the base well, well after midnight. You had long past hit your expiration date; and Bulkhead had to coax you into stumbling out of his cab and standing long enough for him to transform. In the morning—once you had slept off the shock—you would probably be embarrassed; but that was a problem for Future You. In the present, you were content to drowse in Bulkhead's palm like a child, wondering vaguely why you didn't remember being picked up.

Voices. Optimus’ distinctive rumble, Ratchet's slightly more discernible crackle. After a moment, Bulkhead.

Then you were being set down on something soft and covered with something heavy; and all the smells and sounds around you told you it was safe.

If you dreamed, you didn’t remember it.

Chapter End Notes

The alternate ending: ten minutes of Bulkhead convincing the Reader character not to go to sleep on their front porch.
The Lyrids meteor shower, first recorded over 2,700 years ago in China and Greece, has aligned with the Earth once more in 2019, peaking on Easter Night, going into the 22nd of April.

A very happy Easter to all who celebrate it! To all who don't, I wish you a wonderful Sunday filled with sweets acquired for other reasons.

Head's up--as evidenced by the fact that this chapter was barely posted on today, as opposed to technically tomorrow, I have been struggling to keep up with updates. While I will be continuing the once per week schedule in general, I will be taking the next week or two off in order to work up a backlog, get my schoolwork settled, and generally get my roost in a duck. I will see you all sometime in May, whenever that shall be. Happy reading!

EDIT: I don't know why I thought Passover was in May, But It's Not. Happy Passover, folks.

The next morning, consciousness returned like a misthrown boomerang. You rolled over, found that you had been effectively hogtied in what felt like three or four different blankets, and failed to keep yourself from falling headfirst off the couch and onto the grating of the catwalk.

Well. You supposed that served you right for falling asleep in Bulkhead’s cabin.

You stared through the grating at the floor, waiting out the early-morning grogginess. As far as accidentally staying the night on other people’s couches, went, it wasn't the worst awakening you had ever had. You had the fuzzy, vaguely satisfied feeling of having slept long and deeply, and despite the fact that your phone was digging into your hip through your pocket and that your arms were effectively trapped, it was obvious that someone had taken pains to make sure you were comfortable. You made a note to thank the Autobots when you went to apologize for encroaching on their sofa overnight.

Once it became clear the way you had landed was restricting the blood flow to one of your arms, you finally struggled free and went about your morning. You brushed your teeth with a finger and splashed your face in the tiny, barely-finished bathroom; and once you felt vaguely human, you managed to excavate a protein bar from the deepest recesses of your cargo pants. It was horribly bland, and you were almost certain it had gone through the wash at least twice; but the wrapper was still sealed, so you supposed it would do the trick. Halfway through it, you broke down and grabbed a bottled water from the mini-fridge, if only to counteract how dry it was.

There. Breakfast of champions.
You sat back, savoring your water. Early morning light streamed down from hidden windows set high in the walls, barely skirting the edge of the ceiling. The overhead lighting was usually on while you were here; without it, the main room looked softer, calmer. A little more like a place where people lived, maybe.

Unwilling to walk-of-shame it back to Jasper and without anything better to do, you tidied aimlessly. You folded the blankets—of which there was six, why did the Autobots even have six blankets?—and put the catwalk to rights, before going around the room at large, picking up wrappers and sweeping up piles of loose sand and gravel from people’s tires. You could feel the silence of the base around you like a tangible temperature; the unnatural stillness. You supposed that answered the question as to whether or not the Autobots slept or not.

It was reminiscent of the horrible afternoon Wheeljack had arrived, when you had all received the news about Praxus.

You were beginning to really dislike silence.

Eventually, metal footsteps clanked their regally way down the hall, and Optimus stepped into the room. He didn’t seem to acknowledge you, which was a first; so you continued cleaning, leaving him to whatever he did with his mornings. There was no need to be even more of a nuisance than you already had been, after all.

You left to find a broom. When you came back, Optimus had taken his usual place at the console. He seemed pretty deep into it, so you went back to your sweeping, content to work in companionable silence. It had been a long time since you just existed in proximity to someone else. It was surprisingly soothing. You let yourself fall into an early morning daze, the rhythm of sweeping refreshing after the chaos of last night.

You were going to have to check on Mr. Callighan. June had called you from the clinic with the vaguest details possible, but from the sound of it, he had been doing fine. It was tempting to wake up one of the Autobots to bum a ride over there right now; but of course that wouldn't work. The Autobots would be busy, Wheeljack would be either laying down some serious apologies or packing up to leave, and you knew for a fact that the usual roster of patrols had to be kept up. The energon surplus wouldn't stretch longer than a handful of days off, from the sound of it.

A noise drew you from your thoughts, like the sound of a trashcan being torn to pieces. You just barely turned in time to see Optimus' outstretched arm twist itself back into a hand, the faintest gleam of what could have been a knife splintering into pieces and receding into his forearm. Optimus' eyes had been fixed on you; but as you met them, he seemed to start, and looked away uneasily.

“...Oh.” You frowned at his arm, vaguely aware that you were possibly less alarmed at having had a seven-foot-long blade leveled at you than you should have been. It helped that there was only so much damage one could could do with a sword from across a large room; and that the owner of said sword had literally let you sleep uninvited on his couch. “Morning, Optimus,” you said, rather than make a big deal over it.

Optimus had froze, expression unreadable. You resisted the urge to wince—you wouldn’t have been thrilled either, being startled like that first thing in the morning. You waved lamely. “Sorry, I thought you saw me. Thanks for letting me stay on your couch.”

Optimus kept staring.

After a few minutes of just...awkwardly holding each other’s gaze, you went back to sweeping. There was only so much drama you could take first thing in the morning.
“I hope you slept well,” Optimus said, once you had finished the corner you had been working on. “Bulkhead thought it best you stay the night for support after such a troubling time, but you were not lucid to speak for yourself on the matter.”

“Oh,” you said, a little uncomfortably. “Yeah, it’s fine. It’s sweet of you guys to let me, that’s all.”

Optimus tilted his head in acceptance. “We have been informed that Jack and Miko will be due back this morning, although that they did not specify when. In the meanwhile, I believe Wheeljack had been hoping to speak with you.”

The fun never stops. “Alright,” you sighed, gearing yourself up to help resolve this little...whatever it was. “I’ll track him down later, I guess. Thank you for letting me know.”

He inclined his head, and turned back to the screen.

You wondered for the first time if Optimus found your weird little chats as awkward and difficult to navigate as you did.

The two of you worked in silence for another few minutes. You tried to re-capture the feeling of quiet camaraderie that had been in the air before, but nope. You didn't get nice moments, apparently, on account of being the social equivalent of concussed bird. Sooner or later, you were going to bump into something you shouldn't have and make the issue worse.

You considered just attempting to survive until someone else woke up and rescued you. You checked your phone, and groaned—it wasn't even five o'clock. You were pretty sure that was early, even for a military base. Perhaps you should just excuse yourself to make the hike to Jasper, and maybe catching an actual breakfast and some news on your way past the diner.

Then you considered making the issue worse. Because it was 4:57 in the morning, that was the option your absolute disgrace of a brain decided on.

“I have a question,” you blurted. “About the Matrix.”

Optimus’ hands froze on the keyboard. One indiscernible Cybertronian letter repeated itself across the screen, until he remembered himself and released pressure on the key.

“How did you come to hear of the Matrix?” he said, slowly. You could hear an echo to his words, as though someone had superimposed a recording of him saying the same thing in a different tone under his voice.

You stumbled over your words. “Ratchet told me. I’m sorry, I know it’s a secret. You don't have to answer, I don't know why I even--”

“No.”

You took an involuntary step backwards, all of a sudden wider awake than you had been in months.

Optimus closed his eyes, one hand coming to his forehead as if it pained him. He took one, ponderous step back, and knelt, hand still clasped to his head. You blinked away the afterimage of the looming, dangerous warrior, large enough to crush you in a single hand, and stepped forward, concern bubbling in your stomach.

“No,” he repeated, softer, almost sheepishly. Optimus lifted his head, looking terribly exhausted. “I only mean to say that questions are not a burden. I...” He hesitated. “I apologize if I alarmed you.”
There was something odd about his tone of voice. You had the sudden, instinctive feeling of having mistaken a stranger in a crowd for a friend; the startled shock of the unfamiliar where you had expected someone familiar and safe.

You looked again. Just Optimus, looking somehow smaller than usual. You wondered if he was doing that thing Bulkhead sometimes did, hunching and drawing his plating tighter to look less intimidating. You were probably just loopy from waking up early, that was all. “If...if you’re sure? I know it might be, like, a touchy subject--”

“I have always made a point to open discussion on these matters,” Optimus said, gently. “I would welcome your input.”

You squinted. “I just...the way Ratchet explained it, it was kind of like a holy relic for your people, right?” He nodded. “Okay. but he also said something like...it was a tool? And it was kept in your torso. So it's...is it literally in your chest? Like, next to—next to your lungs, and everything?”

“Well.” Optimus mulled your words over. “...When you put it like that.”

You laughed, startled, and hastily checked to make sure Optimus had actually been joking. His face look more or less like it usually did, but there was enough of an upturn to his mouth that you were probably set.

“You had a second question?”

“Mm.” You hesitated. “So, it’s...a fairly big deal, right? Like, it's this...priceless artifact. So, what does it do that you have to have it on you all the time? Ratchet said it was a tool, but he didn't...really specify what you use it for.”

“It is...” Optimus paused, mouth moving soundlessly. One hand tapped absently at the seam that ran down his chest. “I'm sorry. I cannot say.”

Disappointing, but fair. “Okay. I appreciate you indulging my curiosity, anyhow.” You poked at the floor with the broom, determined not to be let down. You weren’t even really sure where you had been going with this. It had just been prying at you since that late night conversation with Ratchet. Something about the early morning had brought it to the front of your mind, somehow.

“It is no hardship. It is not an...often-thought of subject among the Autobots, but that does not mean it ought not to be--” Optimus cut himself off, as a light flashed on the console. “We have an incoming call.”

You squinted at the screen. You knew barely enough Cybertronian to make out the numbers. “20...7? That's the Maine area code. Do you know anyone in Maine?”

“No.” Optimus paused, standing. “Excuse me—there is a research facility we have been in contact with off the coast, but this is not their number.” He frowned ever so slightly. “Stay silent, if you would. The speakers are designed to pick up any voice in the immediate area.”

You mimed zipping your lips. Optimus hesitated.

Oh. Right. “That means I’ll be quiet.”

Optimus tapped a single button, and after a moment, a man’s voice filtered through the console speakers. “Hello?”

“Hello,” said Optimus. “May I ask who is speaking?”
“I'm hurt. Do your kind forget an acquaintance so easily?” The caller asked, voice sardonic. You mouthed *what the fuck* at Optimus. He nodded in agreement.

“Ah.” Optimus considered the display for a moment. Slowly, his fingers began to move on the keyboard. “Commander Bishop, I presume.”

“I prefer Silas. As I'm sure you've already guessed, this isn't a social call.”

“It never is.” The screen lit with an error message. Optimus motioned you over, and you ran to grab your laptop. “What do you want?”

“An exchange. An alliance, if things work out. You see, we have a common enemy, as it were.”

You examined the code Optimus had been attempting to trace the call with. It was largely gibberish to you, but some things were universal. You set to work.

“Really.” Optimus asked, flat as Nebraska.

“Oh, yes. You see, you have somehow allied yourself with a nation that represents everything you and your people once fought against.”

Optimus’ fingers barely paused on the keyboard. “You presume too much.”

“Mm. A class system headed by the rich, for the rich; a country where even something as simple as healing and medicine is denied, should you be too low to be noticed. Sound familiar?”

“You speak of things you know not of,” Optimus said coldly. His tone was in direct contrast to the frustrated look he shot the screen. “And suggest no solutions.”

“Ah, but I do.” Join with MECH. Together, we can enact true change.”

Optimus Prime, leader of the Autobots, quite visibly suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. “I'm sure I don't have to tell you—” A third error message popped up on the screen. You clacked at your own keyboard, frustrated. “--Why such an offer must be met with skepticism. Why would the Autobots ever consider this?”

“Because you love this planet.” Silas’ voice went oily. “Because you have always acted to improve the condition of life for the masses. Because you're used to being a hero, aren't you? Nd I bet it just eats and eats at you to live on a planet full of starving innocents and not do something about it.”

Optimus stared at the fourth error message. When he turned to you, you didn’t have anything better to offer than a shrug. “I think,” he told Silas, “We have nothing more to discuss.”

“Suit yourself.” The line went dead.

You buried your face in your hands. “Great. Okay. So we're super duper bugged.”

“Indeed.” Optimus stared pensively at the screen. “Wake the others, if you would. I must send word to Fowler.”

“Yeah.” You groaned. “God dammit, they’re probably in the database. Which means they know how to read and write in Cybertronian.”

Optimus gave you a kind look. “Your help in the matter is not compulsory.”

“Don't tempt me,” you groused. You were too shaken for good manners, frankly. You could be
polite once you knew there weren't viruses in your friends' computer systems. “I think I'll wake Ratchet up first. I'm sure he's a morning person.”

…

“Well?” Silas set down the phone. “Did we get what we need?”

“Sir,” said Dr. Davis. “It’s goddamn Christmas.”

Chapter End Notes

Reader: I'm not doing a great job with this conversation. I think I might be weirding him out a little.
Also Reader: I know! I'll talk about religion.
Jeans Instability

Chapter Summary

The instability that causes the gravitational collapse of a stellar cloud, along with its subsequent eventual formation into a star

Chapter Notes

Welcome back to our regularly scheduled program! I didn't get everything done that I wanted to, but what I did get done was: half of my academic course load, 9k words of backlog, and most of my end-of semester stuff. Hopefully, we won't need another hiatus anytime soon; but either way, I really appreciate everyone's patience and support. Happy reading!

Edit: It feels like there are a lot of Sunday holidays this time of year. Happy Cinco de Mayo, folks!

You squinted at your screen. The early morning light, with you having noticed, had switched over to late morning light, and a single stream of sunlight darkened your screen unpleasantly. You grit your teeth, fighting the urge to cuss in front of the Bots. “I don’t know whose code this is, but I'm going to break their patellas.”

Optimus shot you a very dry look from his place at the main screen. Ratchet, hunched over the secondary console nearby like a vulture, snorted. “Indeed. We’re going to have to re-do entire sections of coding.” He jabbed an irate finger at the display. “This, for example, we set up as late as last week. Primus. I'm almost impressed.”

You stretched in your seat, wincing as your back cracked conspicuously. “I’m not. It’s gonna take us another month to get this stuff out. It’s everywhere.”

Ratchet grumbled wordlessly, sticking his face back into the screen.

“This was a tactical choice,” Optimus commented. His hands, which had been flying across the keyboard with surprising dexterity, paused for the first time in two hours. “MECH has gained something in return for having given such a wellspring of information up. It is important that we ascertain precisely what that is as soon as possible.”

Ratchet groaned, pressing a button that opened three different tabs up on the central screen. “Yes, yes, yes, but first things first—dealing with the immediate problem. We need to isolate each and every point of contact and shut that slag down. We may need to replace the humans’ devices entirely, depending on the type of bug.”

Your phone was already in a box in the corner, sans SIM card. Since Ratchet had been the one to set it up for you, the Autobots hadn’t had any qualms about treating it as a secure line. As a result, MECH might have had access to your conversations going months back. You should have known
there was something up with that echo. What’s more, when you went back to look through your call and text history to assess just how much of a fluster-cluck you were dealing with here, you found that the bastards had wiped your phone records—apparently, just for that *extra touch*.

You still weren’t sure who these MECH people were, precisely, but you already *hated* them.

The base was in a kind of half-lockdown. People were coming and going—Fowler was expected within the hour—but comms were emergency only, and direct transport in and out of the base was strictly prohibited. It was Ground-bridge or nothing.

You, Ratchet, and Optimus had been working nonstop since about six; although you and Optimus had technically been working longer. Arcee and Bulkhead were searching for any signs of physical bugs, while Bee was sent to retrieve the kids. You didn’t like relying on him too much—he was *thirteen*, after all—but the three of you still desperately needed Raf’s input. If Raf had a sphere of experience, it was centered around cracking and counter cracking. He’d hacked the Jansky telescope array, purportedly; although you weren’t sure if Ratchet was teasing you about that one or not.

In the meantime, you were left sifting through coding you had only *just* implemented days ago. The task was less than encouraging.

“Part of the advantage of altering us to their surveillance is undoubtedly the fear and uncertainty they hope to instill,” Optimus had said when you first returned from altering the others. “Whatever else they hoped to accomplish, we must not allow ourselves to be overly affected.”

“I’m not scared,” You had replied, opening your laptop with more force than strictly necessary. “And I’m *certain* that I’m fucking pissed.”

Nearly four hours later, and you still hadn’t calmed down. You were reasonably certain you had been growling under your breath, since Ratchet kept shooting you *looks*. Hypocrite.

The front door rumbled open. A moment later, Bee screeched to a halt, tires leaving dark smears across the symbol on the floor.

“*Bumblebee*, you know better,” Ratchet snapped, eying the skid marks with disdain. “Clean that up, *now*.”

Bee chattered apologetically, as Raf and Miko scrambled out. You leaned over the edge of the catwalk, scanning the area. Where was--

“Jack got *grounded*,” Miko shrieked.

“What?” Ratchet’s head snapped around.

“What?” You echoed. One sleepover. That was how long it took for these children to get into trouble. You rubbed your temples, fighting a headache. “What *happened*?”

Optimus held up a hand for Miko to wait. “Arcee should be here for this. Bumblebee?”

Bee zoomed down the hallway, chirping a two-syllable tone—Arcee’s name in Cybertronian, presumably.

“In the meantime,” Ratchet said, recovering. “We need your phones.”

Raf handed his over. Miko looked mulish. “*Why*?”
“We’ve had a security breach,” you said, gently. “Maybe a big one. Everything has to be checked.”

Raf groaned softly. “Ugh. Lemme check my laptop.” He clambered onto the catwalk, slouching on the couch next to you.

“You alright?” You nudged him with your elbow.


“Hmm.” You didn’t press it, but you made a note to make sure the kid got some food in him. He was startlingly light. Raf smiled reassuringly, and focused on the screen. His face went slack, lost in whatever eldritch programming he had on his laptop.

Arcee stalked into the room, looking about ready to drive over to the Darbys’ house to give someone a piece of her mind. “Alright, kid, let’s hear it.”

Miko shrugged. “They were yelling at each other when I woke up. I think June had gotten like, a phone call? But also, uh—” she looked shifty. “She...might’ve overheard a weird conversation that happened last night.”

“Primus,” Ratchet grumbled. “Well?”

Wheeljack popped his head in. “Uh—”

“Nope, don’t have time for you.” Miko waved him off.

Bemused, Wheeljack retreated.

With minimal dramatization, Miko outlined their conversation with the Wen sisters. As far as she could remember, no one had actually said the word ‘Autobots’; but it was very clear that she and Jack had been hiding something.

Normally, you would have been alarmed at the thought of yet more teenagers with partial access to sensitive information. Today, it was barely a blip on your radar. “This sounds like a Fowler problem.”

Miko shook her head. “Won’t work. They’re not gonna trust him, especially if they think it’s a ‘Jack and me’ thing, y’know? Like, they’re not gonna risk getting us in trouble.”

“I was under the impression they weren’t fond of the two of you,” Arcee pointed out.

“They’re not.” she shrugged. “It’s like, ‘us vs. them’, y’know? We’re part of the status quo.”

“Can we go back to the part where Jack got grounded, though?” Arcee pressed. “What did you even do?”

“Why is this my fault?” Miko scowled. “They were just shouting when I got up, and then I heard Jack’s door slam and June came and said I should head home. She, uh.” Miko faltered. “She kind of looked like she’d been crying.”

Your heart twisted painfully. Poor June.

Everyone was looking at you. “What?”

“June’s your area,” Arcee pointed out.
“That’s….” You felt called out. “Fair, I guess. I’ll swing by when we’re done here. In the meantime… Rafael?”

He didn’t look up.

“Raf.”

“Mm? Oh.” Raf glanced at you apologetically. “Yeah, I’ve got something. Ratchet, take a look at this.”

Ratchet bent down to see his screen. “Primus. Put it up on the main screen, we’ll have to take this a step at a time.”

As they crowded around the screen, Optimus ushered you to the opposite end of the catwalk. “I recommend you speak with Mrs. Darby as soon as possible.”

“I…” you hesitated. “Now? With everything else going on?”

“I dislike that her reaction came on the eve of another, seemingly unrelated security threat. I fear the two may be related.” Optimus met your eyes solidly. “This is not a time to put faith in coincidence.”

You frowned. “June is not a terrorist. She’s smarter than that.”

“Perhaps. Still, I feel this is the best use of your skills.” Optimus said, gravely. “This is not an order, however. I leave the matter to your discretion.”

You groaned. “No, it’s… fine. I want to make sure she’s okay. I’ll be back around… well, soonish, anyway.”

“I wish you the best of luck.”

...

June answered the door with suspiciously puffy eyes. It was a jarring look on a woman who seemed to roll out of bed with her hair in a tidy ponytail. “Hey.”

“Hey.” you shifted uneasily. “Is this…?”

“It’s as good a time as any.” She smiled wanly. “Come on in.”

The warm, homey living room still held signs of Miko’s presence on the couch last night; but the blankets on the couch didn’t make it any less sittable. June arranged herself in the armchair, legs tucked underneath her like a bird, and picked up a mug of something dark and visibly steaming. She didn’t say a word.

You took the edge of the sofa closest to her. The SIM card you had pulled from your phone pressed into your thigh through the fabric of your cargo pants, but you didn’t take the time to shift so that you’d be comfortable.

You had a feeling very little about this conversation would be comfortable.

“Can I get you anything?” June offered.

You shook your head. “I’m good. You, uh, you wanna talk about it?”

She sighed, considering carefully. When she finally began talking, it was apparent that she was
picking her words carefully. “When you’ve got a little kid, they’re…you’re like their entire world.” She took a sip of her coffee. “When they’re still practically babies, that is. They rely on you for everything. It’s scary, of course, but it’s also…comforting. Like, you’re a filter for everything else, so you’re in prime position to keep them safe.” June sighed shakily. “It’s easier.”

You nodded encouragingly.

June frowned into her cup, and retrieved something from the kitchen. She poured something clear and alcoholic-smelling from a little ornate bottle into her cup, and tasted it experimentally. “You want something?”

“I’m, um. I’m good, June.” You were a little scared, frankly. June wasn’t usually this….indirect. It was so strange to see the no-nonsense lady you looked up to so much act so out of character.

“Fair enough.” She took another pull from the mug. “When Chris—that’s Jack’s father. Did I ever tell you about him?”

You shook your head.

“When Chris left, Jack was…eight—no, seven. We stayed with my parents in California for a while that summer, I remember now. But Jack got...he didn’t really understand what had happened, and if one parent could just up and leave with no warning...”

June trailed off meaningfully. Heart in your throat, you reached over and grasped her hand.

She squeezed it once before letting go. “So, for a while there...Jack and I were pretty much involved in everything that went on in each others lives. For a long while, even. But that’s—it’s part of parenthood to give that up, I think. Like, after a while it’s healthy for him to start keeping some things to himself. He needs to build his own li...” Her voice cracked.

You pulled her into a hug, careful of her coffee-alcohol beverage. Her chin dug into the juncture of your shoulder painfully, like it had been a while since someone had hugged her like this and she’d fallen out of practice. You could feel her physically shaking, hands curled into fists against your back with the effort of maintaining her composure. This must have been so hard for her.

When she pulled away, June’s eyes were even more bloodshot than before, but more or less dry. “Mugh,” she said, stuffily. “Thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it.” You passed her the tissue box.

June blew her nose miserably.

“So, I’ve been...” she sighed. “Trying to give him some space. I trust Jack, y’know? He’s...he’s always been responsible and smart, and he stays away from the bad crowd—well, it’s Jasper, there’s only so much of a bad crowd to begin with. But still.” She took another pull from her mug, like a shot.

When she set it back down, you pulled it away from her and sniffed it. “I think you’ve had enou—is this tequila? Did you put tequila in coffee?”

“Mm-hmm. Tastes horrible.”

“Why would—never mind. I’m brewing you a fresh cup. Do you have anything that’s not Folgers?” You dumped the remainder of the coffee/tequila abomination into the sink and frowned at her coffee machine. The buttons appeared to be labeled in Japanese.
“No.” June stood up, impressively steady. “Stop judging my caffeine bus. It’s good enough.”

“Depressing.” You pulled the jar out of the cupboard anyway. “I’m still listening, by the way.”

June leaned on the counter, rubbing her face in her hands. “I’m so tired.”

“I know, hon.” You hugged her with the arm not holding a scoop of proto-coffee. “You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”

“I need to, I think.” She sighed. “Last night I get this…email. And it’s got all this—it’s basically a portfolio. It says that Jack—that—that he’s in danger, and he’s mixed up in something bigger than him, and that…” She sighed. “Just this bunch of crazy, conspiracy-type stuff, y’know?”

“Yeah?” you said, uneasily. You felt like you had waded into deep waters without realizing it.

“Mm. So I’m like, sure, okay, not likely, except…it’s got these details. Stuff I’ve been noticing for—for months, but didn’t pay any attention to because they weren’t that weird, honestly. So first of all, it’s creepy that they know this stuff, right? But it’s also creepy that…that it’s not as easy to discount as it should have been. But this is late, right? Like, right after I get the call about Mr. Callighan. He’s okay, by the way.”

“That’s, uh, that’s good.”

“Yeah. So I read through all of this, and I call Rosa about it…but then when I get off the phone, I hear Jack and Miko and the Wen girls talking.”

“Talking?” You suppressed a wince, trying to remember what Miko had said they had talked about.

“Talking. Like...in codes, or something. They said something about—families? And blackmail? I don’t even—that’s not something I know how to deal with. But I don’t want to go, you know, jumping to conclusions. That’s the last thing I need right now.” She laughed humorlessly. So I wait until this morning to talk to Jack about it, and he just…” Her voice breaks again, but she powers through it. “He just says something about his science fiction club, and there is no science fiction club at Jasper high, I checked, and so I say that and he gets angry, and I got angry, and…”

She closes her eyes, hands curling into fists so tight you can see her knuckles go dead white.

You felt like you were about to throw up. “June…”

“What do I do?” she whimpered. “I don’t—he’s my son, and I want to trust him, but…”

You…

Very nearly told her everything. You nearly told her about the hollowed-out mesa on the edge of town, and the late-night encounter in September, and the flattened canteen of chicken broth that’s still pasted to the road, even months after the fact. You wanted so desperately to wipe that fractured, hunted look on her face and let her know exactly how many people were out there protecting her kid. How many people were rooting for her.

Instead, you square your shoulders and prepare yourself to look her in the eye and tell her something as near to the truth as you can possibly manage. Except that when you looked up to meet her eyes again, June was already staring at you, something like torn steel filling her gaze.

She said your name, slowly. “You know something, don’t you?”
You froze.

“You...”

This couldn’t be happening.

“What is it? What’s happening with Jack?”

What do you even say?

“Why won’t you—just tell me, please!”

You couldn’t betray your friends’ trust. Their lives were potentially in the balance, especially now.

“Please.”

You couldn’t let your best friend suffer like this.

“Look at me—just say something.”

You couldn’t—you couldn’t...

“Tell me, now.”

With a jolt, you could suddenly hear your own heartbeat again. It felt like it had gone away, for a moment. It felt like it had hidden itself.

You raised your head to look at June. Her face was red as a beat, tears tracing her cheeks in uneven lines. This is your fault.

Underneath the tears, though, her face was pulled into a cold, angry mask. That was what tipped the scales—that clear, indelible inner strength. June would live. She was one of the toughest people you knew. Her heart had healed before.

It would heal now.

“Sorry, June,” you said, softly.

Her face crumpled, but her voice was steady as she told you to get out.

You did.

Chapter End Notes

Jack, listening through the wall: that went well
Mons Olympus

Chapter Summary

Mons Olympus, located on Mars, is the solar system's largest volcano. While it is dormant now, this was not always the case.

Chapter Notes

Discerning readers will notice that this update has not taken place on a Sunday! This is because, firstly, I will be accompanying the rest of my family on a trip to DIY Garden Landscaping Hell today and tomorrow, and also because I can't be bothered to figure out the queuing function right now. Enjoy? Also: more! Fanart! tickytakk drew the last scene from the previous chapter. Check it out!

https://tickytakk.tumblr.com/post/184671980540/authorticity-yooooooo-that-was-such-a-good

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hours later, once the work had come to a pause and Ratchet and Raf were engrossed in matters that he could not assist in, Optimus closed the door to his own quarters and double-checked the lock. On the second try, the red light flickered on, indicating that Optimus' privacy was his own.

He took a deep, deep breath, and as he released it, he also released his hold on the core of freezing numbness fighting to escape the hollow of his chest.

Lines of coldness so intense as to burn flooded through his entire body, tracing fiery lines along invisible scars and old injuries that had long since healed; a museum of wounds collected over eons of active warfare. Optimus focused on breathing as silent and as evenly as he could, determined not to cry out. The joints of his legs protested agonizingly as he forced them to lower him to the ground, careful not to fall lest the noise alert the others.

It was one thing to know that, by rights, he should have been dealing with chronic pain for millenia. It was one thing to understand, in the abstract, that the Matrix had needed a certain type of frame with a certain set of capabilities; and that this was not the frame his spark was equipped to support. It was one thing to know that he had been fighting and taking hits and having wounds healed for eons— that his little archivist’s frame would have been torn to pieces tenfold by now.

It was another thing entirely to know, in such excruciating, intimate detail, exactly what sort of pain the Matrix was holding at bay.

(Or, alternatively, what sort of pain it held over Optimus’ head.)

Dangerdangerdanger, it insisted, bitingly cold in the hollow of his chest. Eliminate the threat. Protect your people.
The memory of what had transpired that morning—what had very nearly transpired—swam through Optimus’ head. The sound of his own voice speaking without his consent, the shadow of unthinking, mechanical reactions calculated and discarded in the blink of a second. The Matrix had not liked that their newest human ally had been potentially given information on it without Optimus’ knowledge, no—and combined with their alien status, even that shred of knowledge had been enough to label them a threat.

The trouble with computers, Optimus thought distantly, was that they took everything so terribly literally.

“They are not a threat,” Optimus insisted aloud, wincing as the ghost of a scar he barely remembered gaining pulled across his face. “They are small. They are kind.” They were also, thank goodness, not so perceptive as to realize how much danger they had been in. Their little face had been startled; but not in the way they were when Bulkhead moves to close, or Arcee to fast. Their face had been curiously still.

His phantom wounds pulsed painfully. The Matrix howled, the denial of ancient protocols whipping it into an artificial frenzy. Danger! Other! Compromised! Duty! Duty duty duty duty duty—

“My duty is not to you or your secrets,” Optimus insisted. Stubbornly, he hauled himself back to his feet. “My duty it to my people.”

DUTY! The Matrix shrieked triumphantly. Protect enforce preserve protect (your own against the alien)—

“They are one of my own,” Optimus snapped without thinking.

OTHER, The Matrix snarled, blisteringly cold, and shoved one of Optimus’ own memories to the forefront of his mind.

Optimus batted it away irritably. That memory was older than Orion Pax—older than the city-state of Iacon, even. It held nothing he hadn’t spent eons ruminating over already.

The Matrix was not alive, as far as he could tell; but it was programmed with several objectives, most of which were outdated by a matter of millenia. One of these was to protect the Cybertronian race from—well, from one particular alien threat; but in their absence, any perceived menace originating from an outside source. Optimus’ decision to ally his people with extraterrestrials had been taken badly; but the directive to obey the Prime had, for a time, superseded that which called for the elimination of alien danger. Apparently, that was no longer the case.

The icy feeling in his fingers intensified. Optimus felt his hand twitch involuntarily, as though obeying another’s command.

He suppressed a groan. Not this again. The Matrix—as far as he was aware, at least—was not capable of wresting control from him. Still, the threat of it would not stand, either. Optimus curled a finger in the space under his forearm guard, hooking it around sensitive wiring. “Cease,” he said, calmly. “Or you shall cause me to pull.”

The Matrix, whatever else it was, was programmed to prevent harm to all Cybertronians. The cold in Optimus’ limbs vanished entirely, leaving only a faint tingling.

Optimus suppressed a sigh of relief. It would not have been a grievous injury, but it would have required help to correct, and he didn’t feel like attempting to explain the fact that he had used his own pain as a bargaining chip against the Matrix to Ratchet. The doctor had already been toying with a
diagnosis of depression for decades; and Optimus didn’t particularly want to spread any more fuel upon that particular bonfire more than was strictly needed. Matters of bluffing arguably sapient computers into obedience were alarming enough on their own without considering the psychological ramifications.

He stood upright, relishing the feeling of movement without pain, achingly aware of how close agony was at any given moment. In the early days of his Primacy, Optimus had longed to share such gifts of healing and physical peace with his soldiers. That particular wish had passed quickly.

There was still the matter of the human. While Optimus was confident that they themselves were no threat to the Autobots, he was no longer sure of their safety with him. Perhaps it would behoove him to find something useful for them to do, very far away—at least for a short time. While he had no right or desire to ask them to relocate entirely, a week or so out of Jasper on some risk-free errand might appeal to them—their own work permitting, of course. They had proven themselves so far to be accommodating to a fault. While Optimus might have preferred to represent the Autobots in person, they might serve as a chaperone on some minor message of goodwill, or some routine patrol. Something to consider, at least.

In the meanwhile, Optimus had spent far too much time to sort things out already. Selfish of him, that the discomfort of the Matrix’s protests had forced him away from his duties, even for a few minutes. He took a moment to center himself—if he returned in this state, Ratchet would shoot him dirty looks until Optimus submitted to an interrogation, and this was certainly not Ratchet’s burden to bear—and braced himself to return to the company of others. With luck, everyone else would be too engrossed in their own tasks to notice his absence.

Without the soundproofed walls in the way, the distant murmur of voices filtered through the hallways. That, more than anything, help Optimus to ground himself again. He had always found the presence of others soothing, at a distance.

As he rounded the corner on the mezzanine, however, whatever improvement his mood had undergone vanished as the warm, cloying smell of blood filtered through the doorway. Alarmed, Optimus quickened his steps, battle protocols humming to life—only to find the room empty, except for Raf. The smell of blood was coming from his hands.

“Rafael.” Optimus came closer, hesitant to startle the boy. He didn’t look up. “Rafael. You are injured.”

“Mm.” Raf muttered. His fingers didn’t pause.

With his smallest finger, Optimus gently lifted Raf’s hands away from the keyboard. Raf blinked, as though rousing from sleep. “Optimus? What—ow. Ow!” He examined his fingers, which were dry and cracked at the knuckles. They were also shaking noticeably. “I...I didn’t notice.”

Carefully, Optimus shut Raf’s laptop. “Where is Ratchet?”

“I think he said, um. I think he said med-bay.” Raf’s voice wobbled alarmingly. “Ow...”

“We shall join them.” He held out a palm. Raf clambered on and curled up, hunching over his hands. “Have you ever failed to notice such an injury before?”

“No. Or I don’t think so, at least.” Raf’s voice took on a faint, unhappy sing-song quality more familiar in Miko. “It really hurts.”

“Ratchet will help.” If Ratchet didn’t have human first aid supplies on hand, Optimus was going to
have stern words for him. “From now on, I wish for you to keep a companion on hand whenever you are working. If not Ratchet or Bee, I encourage you to seek myself out.”

“I could probably get Pilar to help at home,” Raf muttered. “How did I not notice?”

“You are dedicated to your discipline.” Optimus suppressed a smile as Raf brightened at the praise. “This is commendable. Yet you cannot allow something you love to harm you so.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Raf tilted his head up. “Thanks for taking me, by the way. I know you’re really busy.”

The Matrix flickered a shade cooler. Optimus steadfastly ignored it. “It is what I am here for, Rafael.”

Upon his return, Magnus failed to turn the corner fast enough.

“Sir,” said Perceptor, stepping fully into his line of sight and inclining his head respectfully. Magnus had always appreciated the scientist’s reserved, professional manner; in particular, his ability to compartmentalize his curiosity. It had been very rare, once upon a time, to find Perceptor where he wasn’t supposed to be. Magnus personally blamed his change of behavior on the other chief scientist, even if his personal presence was not essential to the corruption. “I’m sure you can anticipate my question.”

“There was no detectable trace of Wheeljack or his vessel at the coordinates,” Magnus said, as gently as he could. It was still, perhaps, too blunt. Delivering difficult news in an emotionally careful fashion had never been among his strengths. “As there were not at the last three sites scouted by landing parties equipped with your scanners.”

Perceptor narrowed his eyes, looking the faintest touch frustrated. Magnus bowed his head in acknowledgment of the emotional display, and turned away to give him some privacy.

“You’re sure you were using it right, right?” said an indecipherably grating voice. Brainstorm stepped out from behind Perceptor, eying the device at Magnus’ hip as though he might snatch it back and start fiddling with it then and there. “I mean, the UI was pretty intuitive—nice job on that, by the way—”

Perceptor nodded in thanks.

“--But Nautica was saying—you remember Nautica, Mags, she’s the nice purple one—Nautica was saying that if we made it so that it connected to directly the HUD itself--”

Magnus resisted the urge to grit his teeth. Brainstorm’s presence might not have been essential, but it certainly seemed to be unavoidable. “That is neither my name nor my title, soldier.”

Brainstorm blinked at him. “Mm, I know. So if we connected it the HUD itself, we could use the extra hardware space to pick up more of a signal boost than what Perceptor already rigged up the other day. More signal boost means more range, and therefore more chance of finding the BS'--”

“We’re not calling it that,” Perceptor cut in.

“--The BS’ energy source,” Brainstorm finished, voice raised to make himself heard.

“I’m sure Command will be able to take that into consideration,” Magnus said, as diplomatically as
he could. He was fit to perform on any oversight committee his commanding officer assigned him to, but he couldn’t help but hope she didn’t see fit to ask him to sit in on this one. An entire lecture’s worth of Brainstorm’s unthinking arrogance and lack of manners was a highly unpleasant thought. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Perceptor watched Magnus march away, feet tapping a metronome’s tempo against the polished tile. “You know,” he said, drily. “This is why I prefer to have Nautica babysit you when I’m not around.”

“Wounded.” Brainstorm cackled at him, eyes dancing. “Positively wounded. It’s just a little extra incentive, you know. It’s certainly better than trying to bribe the old stick-in-the-mud.”

Perceptor would have paid good money to watch his idiot partner attempt to bribe the un bribable. Then again, perhaps he wouldn’t—he’d need to save it for the bribe money. “I hope you know people will never take you seriously if you continue this like this,” he said, not unkindly.

“I don’t want them to take me seriously, Percy. I want them to do what I want.” Brainstorm said, as if this was a very normal set of priorities to have, and not the sort of remark that kept Perceptor up at night with visions of his partner taken to court on some sort of scientific ethical charges.

Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face, because the sliver of face visible above Brainstorm’s mask softened. “I’ll dial it back, I promise. You have to stop worrying so much about what people think, you know.”

“I don’t feel like I have to take this from the scientist who spent half our courting period trying to impress me with larger and more elaborate weaponry. Please at least try to play well with others?”

Brainstorm shot him a beaming grin, full of empty reassurances born of genuine affection. Perceptor analyzed it, cataloged every minute detail and micro-expression, and saved the memory for later. “Not in a million years.”

Perceptor sighed at him, drawing him into a hug in the middle of the hallway. A few personnel passed on either side, but Perceptor was too busy memorizing the warmth of Brainstorm’s frame humming against him to care.

“We’re gonna find him, right?” Brainstorm said into Perceptor’s chest. “I mean, he’s, he’s part of the...he’s family.”

Perceptor knew what he meant. Wheeljack had his own issues to work out before making any sort of commitment to anyone, romantic, platonic or otherwise; but in the years that Perceptor had worked with him, he had become a sort of destructive sibling; like an old chunk of metastable explosives. He also disappeared with the frequency and immediacy of explosive devices, of course; but this time was different. This time hadn’t been on his terms.

“Our course we will,” Perceptor said, and held Brainstorm just a bit tighter.
once he began dating Brainstorm. He did, however, get worse at hiding it.
When you returned to the base, you were running on empty. You let your bike run into the wall and fall over, climbed up onto the catwalk with some difficulty, and curled up underneath the blankets still folded on the sofa. Too exhausted to nap, you buried your face in the covers, hating the fact that you couldn’t just roll over and sleep for the rest of eternity. There was work to be done. With any luck, there always would be.

Reluctantly, you wobbled to your feet. Seeing as you were an adult who was capable of things, you couldn’t rest yet, as much as you wanted to. You just wanted to hide from everyone and everything. Unfortunately, neither you nor anyone else was going to have a moment’s peace until you dealt with your problems.

The main room was empty; but there were obvious signs that folks had been working here. You climbed back down, taking it all in as you tried to suss out where your backpack had gone. The pile of crates in the corner had shifted from one wall to the other; and there was a pile of snack wrappers on the console—evidence that Raf had been too preoccupied to clean up after himself. You should have been there to help—it looked like they had needed it.

Halfway through digging your laptop out of your bag, you looked up to see Optimus. “Oh. Hey.”

He was watching you from the doorway with the suggestion of a concerned frown on his face. “You appear distressed.”

You sniffled, wrung out. You felt like a child coming off a temper tantrum. What your face looked like was anyone’s guess, but you would have put money down that it was still puffy and red. You were an ugly crier. “Yeah, uh...yeah. You could say that. Where’s everybody?”

“I have directed Bumblebee to take Miko and Rafael home,” Optimus said, stepping fully into the room. He was keeping even more of a social bubble around him than usual, and you wondered if you were really worrying him that much. You supposed you couldn’t blame him for being wary of an upset, unpredictable alien. “We believe the security breach is neutralized for now, although attempts to ensure this are ongoing. Currently, Bulkhead and Wheeljack are in the lower levels, patching up a crack they had found while scanning the base. Arcee and Ratchet are in the med-bay...
examining the last of the hardware we found. You are welcome to join them, but I would strongly urge you to rest.”

That sounded alright by you. You wobbled back towards the catwalk. “You should probably—probably hear what happened. S’not great.”

“Due time.” Optimus’ stance didn’t change, but he still gave off the impression of hovering. You slunk gratefully back to the couch.

At a second glance, Optimus didn’t look much better than you felt. The solemn, dignified sadness that was his default expression held a jagged edge, as though he was expecting something unpleasant at any given time. Something unquantifiable about the way he was standing made you want to ask if he had lost a fistfight or something.

He just looked beat.

You recounted your conversation with June, doing your best not to pay too close attention to what you were saying. If you did, you were going to break down again, and you were just so tired of weeping. You were ready to move on with your day, even if your brain chemistry wasn’t.

Optimus’ kicked puppy look deepened steadily. “Your alliance with us has cost you dearly.”

“You rested your chin on your knees. “There wasn’t really a good choice to be had, there. I feel like I should have just told her, but...I don’t feel like I can take the initiative on something that’s life or death like that, y’know? That was just...literally the worst feeling possible.” You suppressed a shudder. You felt queasy, for some reason, and talking about it wasn’t making that any better. Throwing up in front of the leader of an alien race was the last thing you needed.

“I can’t apologize enough for having put you in this situation.”

You craned your head back to meet Optimus’ gaze. “What? It was my choice.” You had—well, you hadn’t sought out Optimus’ fight, all those nights ago, and you hadn’t parked your truck purposefully underneath Bulkhead’s fanny or anything, but you had made the decision to let these people stay in your life and let their situation influence yours. You had known from the beginning what you were getting into.

“One that you now have ample reason to regret.” Optimus shifted in place, shoulders sliding gingerly back into his usual gravitas-filled stance as if they pained him. “This arrangement carries with it its own consequences. For you to face them so harshly is unfair.”

“I don’t blame you.” You said, solidly. “And—and I’m not justifying that, because I am much too tired to do the, you know, the words-thing good. Although you’d probably win the argument if I were in my right mind, so. I just don’t. And even if I did—” Your eyes burned. All your emotions were turned up to their highest setting, it seemed. “Even if I did, it’d be worth it. Everyone here is worth it.”

Embarrassed, you burroughed under the blankets. For a long moment, everything was silent. You wondered if Optimus had left.

A frighteningly large, incredibly gentle finger brushed against your back through the covers. You whipped your head out of the covers in time to see Optimus pull his hand away, looking ever so faintly embarrassed. “You honor us,” he said softly, and turned to go.

“Wait—shit—” you struggled upright, kicked your feet free. “Don’t go anywhere, you look fucking awful. Don’t do the dignified exit thing when you look that bad.”
“The...” Optimus looked at you as though you were a faintly perplexing animal.

“The dignified thing, yes.” You nodded, aware that you were going to be mortified forever once you had enough rest to think properly again. “You sort of dramatically sweep in and out of rooms a lot, I don’t know if you’ve realized.”

“You needn’t be concerned.” Optimus said aloofly, and turned to leave.

You let it go. You weren’t his parent, and if he wanted to run himself ragged when he was already halfway there, that was his constitutional right. Never mind that he looked like he had been run the wrong way through a cheese grater.

“Through a what?”

Holy fuck, you had said that out loud.

You stared up at Optimus, hands clasped over your mouth like a mask in order to catch any more stupid before it could escape. Shame and pure, primordial mortification bubbled into a thick soup in your throat, choking you. At least Optimus didn’t look particularly angry. If anything, the baffled expression on his face was more of a visible reaction than you could ever remember seeing on him.

There was no social protocol that you knew of that could fix this, save for attempting to explain yourself or apologizing for the rest of forever. Honestly, you weren’t even sure that you could justify what that had meant to yourself, let alone the alien space pope you had just accidentally insulted. “It—I didn’t mean...” You stammered gracelessly. When nothing particularly articulate came to mind, you gave up and groaned, burying your face back in your hands. “I am so fucking sorry.”

After a long moment, you peeked though the cage of your fingers. Optimus was still staring at you with that slightly befuddled look that looked so much stronger compared to his usual range of expressions.

“It...” Impossibly, the corners of Optimus’ mouth twitched. “That is...completely ridiculous.”

You stared. “Uh. Yeah? It is?”

“That is completely...” Optimus snorted, turning away and covering the bottom half of his face with a hand. You could still see the edges of his eyes crinkle.

“Wow,” you said, shocked back into the land of the semi-coherent. “Wow. Are you...okay?”

Optimus took a moment to steel himself, any trace of mirth melting away as though it had never happened. You felt, ironically, a little like you had seen Bigfoot without a camera. “No. I am not. I apologize for...” he trailed off.

“This conversation has just about been a train wreck all round, hasn’t it,” you ventured.

He blinked slowly at you, like a cat. “A frequent occurrence, between us. Your patience is commendable.”

There was a lot to unpack here, but you had a feeling neither of you were up to the task at the moment. “Nah, you’re fine. You should probably—do you even have a bed? I don’t think I’ve even seen you sit, in like, a chair. But you should probably, uh, call it a night, if you’re this loopy.”

“Perhaps,” he conceded. “Again, I would encourage you to do the same. The sofa is yours, for as long as you need it.”
You wrinkled your nose, despite the siren call of the blankets. “Are you sure I’m not intruding?”

“Very. It was not so long ago that I told you that you would always be welcome among us.” He stepped back, formally, and inclined his head. “Rest now. We will discuss our next move in the morning.”

“That’s...okay. Thanks, then.” You pulled the covers back over you, vaguely flustered.

On his way out, Optimus paused. “Hm. A cheese grater.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Sleep well.”

You woke up at a far more reasonable hour than the day before. The Autobots slowly filtered in, one at a time; but other than sitting up to greet Optimus, who nodded formally at you and promptly avoided eye contact for the next few hours, you pretended to sleep, watching the room through your eyelashes. You weren’t sure how well it worked on Ratchet, who scanned everyone and everything like a child with a new magnifying glass; but it worked well enough on the others that you got to sit through three different people arranging the blankets so that you’d be cozier. You were pretty sure Wheeljack purposefully waited until none of the others were watching, too. These people.

You were treated to Wen’s Diner takeout and gossip for breakfast, both courtesy of Miko. Mr. Callighan was being released from the hospital that afternoon, apparently; Rosa had arranged for someone to him up. Mr. Wen had been subdued when she’d stopped by; but had packed an extra serving of hash browns with your name on it. You made a note to thank him, the next time you dropped by. Mrs. Nguyen was trying to make a zen garden, whatever that was, and June...

Miko skipped over June. You wished she hadn’t, but didn’t press it. As long as she was okay, so were you.

Ratchet tapped the side of the catwalk, impatiently. “I don’t suppose you have any expertise in counterintelligence?”

“I have the opposite of experience in counterintelligence,” you replied. “Sorry.”

He harrumphed. “Then today I want you doing inventory in the med-bay. I don’t care if you never speak a word of Cybertronian yourself, but you should at least memorize the labels on the bins. There are a few that are hazard symbols that’d do you good to learn, too. Well? Are you coming or not?”

You stuffed the rest of your bread into your mouth like a snake eating a mouse and scrambled off the catwalk. The ladder swayed as you moved, but you barely noticed as you compensated. That was probably not a good thing to become accustomed to.

When the two of you rounded the corner on the med-bay, Bulkhead was already there, staring at the wall as if it owed him money. Ratchet cleared his throat, pointedly. “Well?”

“Oh. Uh, sorry. I’ll just get out of your way.” He started to shuffle off. “Actually, uh, Ratchet. You ever get any weird sounds from this wall? Creaks or groans, or stuff?”

Ratchet narrowed his eyes. “Yes, actually. I has assumed it was part of living in a comparatively old building. Is something wrong with it?”
“Probably not.” Bulkhead shrugged uneasily. “Just, uh, keep an eye on it. Let me know if anything changes.”

Ratchet arched an eyebrow at Bulkhead’s retreating back. “That was odd.”

You were inclined to agree with him, but you also hadn’t liked the look on Bulkhead’s face. “I hope nothing’s wrong.”

“If it is, we’ll hear about it soon enough.” Ratchet crossed the room and pulled out a toothpaste-looking tube of something. “This is your second assignment. Get Raf to put this on his knuckles, and keep gloves on so that it will be absorbed through the skin. He managed to crack the skin of his fingers from typing too much yesterday, and I don’t want it to get worse. Understand?”

“Sure.” It wasn’t like Raf was a fussy kid to begin with. “So, labels. Do I get a cheat sheet?”

“You do indeed. Today.” Ratchet shot you an arch look. “I suggest you commit it to memory as best you can.”

You frowned. “I’m not comfortable messing around in a room filled with dangerous stuff if I don’t have anyway to identify it, Ratchet.”

“Please. I’m not stealing the safety net away before you’re ready. Just keep in mind that you need alternate methods of engaging your memory than a piece of paper. There’s rarely time for cheat sheets in an emergency. Now chop chop, we haven’t got all day.”

It was exactly the sort of physically taxing, mentally obnoxious work you needed. Ratchet had given you a tablet the size of your entire body, that you could type on best via stepping on the keys. You had to mark each category with the appropriate name, which meant tracking it down on the unhelpfully expansive extended alphabet; and then keeping track of which numbers meant which using the chart. The shelf had enough room for a human to walk comfortably between the containers; but the bins themselves were as tall as an industrial dumpster. You needed a stepladder or something, jeez.

About halfway through the third shelf from the bottom, Ratchet stuck his head back in. “Your grandmother is a scientist, correct?”

You paused, halfway through copying a label. “Yeah. My mom, too. Why?”

Ratchet’s customary scowl deepened. “Do you know if either of them had done any work with the Griffin Rock Research Facility?”

You blinked. “That’s a lot father north than I think either of them have ever lived, at least on this continent, but I can check.”

“Please do. We’ve have minimal interactions with some of the law enforcement personnel in the town surrounding, and we’re concerned that the use of the local area code was an implicit threat against them.”

“Can’t you just ask them for their personnel records?”

“We did.” Ratchet rolled his eyes. “Apparently, they were destroyed in some sort of incident involving an automated window-washing drone.”

He disappeared back down the hallway, as if that wasn’t about three different follow-up conversations rolled into one. You groaned, digging out the SIM card still jabbing your leg through
your pocket, and went to check if your phone had been cleared or not.

Chapter End Notes

The Matrix: I am NOT a CHEESE GRATER. Stop laughing. STOP IT.
Optimus: *snerk*
Sirius

Chapter Summary

with a Magnitude of -1.46, Sirius is the brightest star in our sky. Also known as the Dog Star, for its place as Canis Major's most noticeable star, Sirius can be seen most notably in the winter sky.

Chapter Notes

Observant readers will notice that this update isn't on Sunday. Or even on the weekend. The first and truest reason for this is because I took a week off a couple weeks ago, and I'm a perfectionist. It's been 24 weeks since I started this story and I want there to be 24 chapters, dammit. The second, more immediate reason is that I wrote 6k words on this godforsaken project over the course of one morning, and I feel like I deserve a treat for that. So.
To be clear, there will also be a update on or near Sunday this week. There's just also an update on Friday, because my self-control isn't quite up to par.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hello?”

You smiled, mood involuntarily lifted. Your grandfather was just an inherently soothing man. He always had been. While your parents were your idols in one way or the other, and your grandmother plied you with the all support and the opportunities she hadn’t had as a child, it was Gramps who took you out to sit in the woods after a bad day at school to listen to the sounds of the trees and the squirrels. Your parents inspired you to become more than what you were, and your grandmother gave you means to become who you wanted to be; but he was the one who told you that the person you were was already worth cherishing just as much. “Hey. How’s life, Gramps?”

He cackled into the receiver. “Eyyy! Life’s damn cold, is what it is. There’s gonna snow on the ground before Thanksgiving, I’m telling you. You gonna make it home?”

You winced. “Probably not. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll make your excuses. You got snowed in, how’s that? Couldn’t make it to the airport.”

“I live in a desert?”

“It was one hell of a blizzard.”

You snickered. “Has Gran figured out Skype yet? We could do that.”

“Nope. She’s damn pissed about it, too.” He said, smug as punch. Your grandfather was inordinately proud of the fact that he was the one in the family who made the effort to keep up with technology. If
it didn’t support FORTRAN, Gran didn’t want a thing to do with it. “I’ll see what we can rig up, though. So I’m assuming this is a social call, and now you wanna hear all about the latest happening in our bridge club, right?”

“Sure, but maybe later. I actually wanted to know if Gran or Mom ever worked at the Griffin Rock Research Facility--?”

“Nope.”

“Nope?”

“Nope. Your grandmother hates that place. Said something about it being the set of a kitschy science fiction movie, or something. Your Mom got an offer, but she took the job in Germany instead. You remember—she would’ve had to leave before your middle school graduation ceremony.”

“Aw. That seems like a bad thing to base a pivotal life decision on, but it’s sweet.”

“Well, it was important to her. She did wind up meeting the guy she would’ve been working with, though—a Dr. Green, I think. Nice young man, good taste in ties. Why? You get an offer?” He sounded ever so faintly hopeful. Out of your entire family, he had taken the news that you were moving out of state the hardest. Your mother had always traveled more far, far more than she had been at home; but at least her name was on the paperwork. At least she would always come home to roost.

“Nah, not me,” you said. “Uh. Someone at work asked about them, that’s all.”

“Ah, well.” At least he didn’t sound too broken up about it. “Sounded like good work, if you could get it. That IT gig still treatin’ you well?”

You chatted comfortably for another few minutes, before the dulcet tones of your grandmother yelling at one of the neighbors drew him away. You hung up the phone, feeling more at ease than you had for weeks.

“Well?” Ratchet stuck his head in.

You wrinkled your nose. “Were you eavesdropping?”

“Yes. Did they work there or not?” he said, bluntly.

“My mom got an offer there, but she turned it down. And it sounds like my grandmother had enough dealings with them to disapprove of them, but nothing concrete.”

He didn’t look reassured. “Hmm. We’ll keep an eye on the situation. And how, may I ask, is the inventory coming along?”

“Now that I’m off the phone, probably a lot faster.” You stood up, stretching, and jumped to reach the second shelf.

You were only vaguely aware of the rest of the base for the rest of the morning. Wheeljack and Miko seemed to have reached an accord of some sort, which you were unwilling to poke lest it explode again; but Bulkhead still seemed preoccupied. He had taken to grumbling softly at the walls, looking concerned and frustrated. Which you were...not entirely comfortable with. Once Miko was at school and Raf was situated on the med-bay table, nursing a head cold, Arcee and Bee took turns trying to coax Bulkhead out of it, or at least into articulating what was wrong. You were very interested in hearing what he had to say yourself—or at least, in getting him to stop rumbling ominously at the
pillars. He was rapidly reclaiming his title as the most unnerving Autobot.

Wheeljack stopped in to say goodbye at least three different times. He wasn’t actually leaving until the kids had a chance to see him off; which meant he had enough time to remember something else he wanted to say to you or to Ratchet every couple of hours. With every visit, you could feel your smile growing more and more plastic. You swore one time he was going to come back with a ring in a box; and when that happened, you weren’t sure if Ratchet or you were going to kill him first.

Optimus had made himself noticeably scarce. You were dealing with some blisteringly acute social anxiety after the fact yourself, so you didn’t feel particularly inclined to seek him out; but you did hope that you hadn’t disgraced yourself too badly. You frowned guiltily, even as you slid the drawer you had just finished back into place.

(Although a few of the remarks he had made that had managed to stick with you through the haze of exhaustion made you wonder if his absence was less out of distaste as it was misplaced courtesy.)

Regardless, Optimus had far worse problems to deal with than you. You had far worse problems to deal with than your own social awkwardness, in fact. You snapped yourself back into focus with a shake, turning back to the newest bin.

“Watching you work is very entertaining,” Ratchet commented from across the room. “You can actually see your train of thought as your mood changes.”

“That is certainly not a thing.”

Ratchet studied you for a moment. “Puppies.”

Your lips quirked upward involuntarily. You clapped your hands over your mouth, trying valiantly to scowl. “Stop it. You were in a terrible mood thirty seconds ago.”

“Your suffering alleviates mine,” Ratchet said, straight-faced.

You snorted unattractively. He looked ever so faintly proud of himself.

“I don’t think I like that you guys are getting along better,” Raf said, smiling quietly. “I thought I would, but I don’t.”

“Yes, well.” Ratchet sobered, mouth twisting into an unhappy scowl. He hunched over his work again.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass him,” Raf whispered.

You tussled his hair. “We’re all a little loopy, bud. How’s your throat?”

Raf dutifully sipped his tea. “It’s not that bad. I kind of played it up so that I could stay here and help.”

He had been swaying on his feet earlier. You were unconvinced. “I need to stock the mini-fridge with some healthier comfort foods.”

“Like chicken broth?”

“Yes, like chicken broth, you little munchkin. Ratchet, stop laugh—it’s not that funny. Stop laughing!”
Harry Wen had never liked hospitals.

It wasn’t the smell—well. It was a little bit the smell. Mostly, though, it was the forced airiness; the calculated space between one wall and the next designed to make sure that people didn’t feel trapped. Contained. All it really did was give off the impression of beauty created for the sole purpose of disguising something ugly. It was so clean, you had to wonder what they were washing away.

“Dad,” muttered Moira. “Stop glaring at the wall.”

Harry stopped glaring at the wall. “Sorry! Sorry, lost in thought.”

“Just so we’re clear,” Maeve said, without looking up from her phone. “We’re still not sure if you like him or not.”

(Neither was Harry.)

He huffed indignantly. “Never you mind. We’re just being neighborly, that’s all. Someone around here has to be, since he certainly won’t.”

“Mm.” Moira leaned back, eyes closed. “You know we could have gone up and walked him down, right? We’re listed as his ride.”

The thought of seeing Michail Callighan laying in a hospital bed—of seeing him thin and frail and vulnerable—made Harry’s throat close up. He hated hospitals. He hated the way they sucked the life out of someone, made them look pale and washed-out, as though something had to be taken out of them to be mended before they could heal. Like seeing a stuffed bear without its cotton, he thought involuntarily, and nearly gagged.

“I think we can trust the old fool to make it down the stairs, at least,” he said, as cheerfully as he could.

Moira and Maeve shot him identical looks. He was certain he hadn’t raised them to be so sassy.

“Mr. Wen?” said a nurse. He looked up. “Yes, I’m--”

His blood ran cold.

“Oh,” muttered Maeve. “Wow. Is the wheelchair really necessary?”

“It’s for legal purposes,” said the nurse. “Um, is everything…?”

Misha Callighan looked over and met his eyes, and for a moment, Harry could feel him picking up on his mood, his panic; the tell-tale rush of memories like blood vessels dotting his vision--

“Well, Wen?” Callighan snapped. His accent was thicker than usual, closer to how he had spoken when he and Harry had met. “I know you have trouble, but if you need someone to explain how a chair with wheels works, this is a good place for it.”

And just like that, Harry was alright again, if less than charmed. If Mi—if Callighan was strong enough to sit up in the wheelchair and pin him with those ice-gray eyes, if his voice was as sharp and accented as it had always been--

Well, the old fool had certainly survived worse.

“The only one having trouble around here is you, apparently,” Harry retorted like muscle memory.
“Calling the entire family all the way out here—”

“Rosa called you, you old—!”

The nurse glanced at Moira. “Um?”

She shrugged. “They’re feeling better, I promise.”

“I had assumed,” she said drily. “Are they going to be able to survive in a combined space until they can get home, though?”

Maeve wrinkled her nose. “If we put one in the front seat and other behind him, maybe? That way they can’t reach each other.”

“What if the one in the back kicks the seat?” asked Moira.

“He could do that from the diagonal.”

“Fair. We’ll figure it out, ma’am, no worries.”

Harry fought a smile. The warmth was only just returning to his limbs, and the distraction was welcome. “We can hear you, you know.”

“Oh! Here you all are!”

The ensemble turned. Dr. Darby had come through the front doors behind them. “I was afraid I missed you! Mr. Callighan, how do you feel?”

“Much, much better,” he said approvingly. “The Wen family was just about to take me back to Jasper, in fact. You do good work here.”

June Darby smiled, flattered, but her eyes held a suspiciously red tint. “Janet does good work.”

“Your daughters got their brains from mother,” Callighan said approvingly. “Thank God.”

“Oh! Here you all are!”

The ensemble turned. Dr. Darby had come through the front doors behind them. “I was afraid I missed you! Mr. Callighan, how do you feel?”

“Much, much better,” he said approvingly. “The Wen family was just about to take me back to Jasper, in fact. You do good work here.”

June Darby smiled, flattered, but her eyes held a suspiciously red tint. “Janet does good work.”

Janet the nurse grinned happily.

“And how are you feeling, Doctor?” Harry asked, trying to strike the right note between ‘cheery’ and ‘concerned’. “You look done in.”

“Oh,” Dr. Darby waved a hand. “Long shifts, you know.”

“You just got here, though,” Janet pointed out.

June shot her a look that was probably something like: *do not do this in front of my wounded neighbors*. “I’m fine. Just a falling out with some distant family, that’s all. If you’ll excuse me. Mr. Callighan, you take care of that head.”

“Is only one I have, doctor.”

Dr. Darby swept out of the room, heels clacking on the tile.

“Nurse...” Callighan said, slowly.

“I’ll check in with her. You all just worry about getting home safe.” Janet flashed them a reassuring, gleamingly professional smile. “Mr. Wen, if you’d go get your vehicle?”
“Ah--?” Maeve tossed him the keys. “Of course! I’ll be back in a split.”

“You haven’t split anything but a banana in years,” Misha called after him.

Harry fought the smile until he was well past their line of sight. That was one was pretty good.

It was concerning that June was doing so poorly, though. The last time she had appeared so visibly upset was when Chris—no, during poor Jack’s appendectomy, perhaps. When Chris had left, June Darby had snarled him out like a lioness. Chris had lost his chance, and gotten no others. If there had been sadness, it had been eclipsed with anger.

Good lord, Harry hoped Jack was alright. There were only so many things that could make someone so sad so quickly. Or their neighbor, maybe, the one with all the sweaters—June seemed to have half-adopted them. It hadn’t been so long since he’d seen them, though; surely nothing could have happened so quickly, could it?

He sighed, starting the car and searching for the connection between the hospital drive and the parking lot. Harry was getting very tired of hearing about bad things happening to people he cared about. It was very nearly like the sixties again.

(That was a chilling thought.)

Then again, he mused, stopping at the superfluous stop sign. June was stronger than people gave her credit for. Whatever was happening, she would come out on top.

Besides, everyone looked weaker in the hospital.

…

You made it back to your house by late afternoon. As much as you loved having tons of people around for a change, you were ready to recharge your batteries. You showered, changed into some proper pajamas, and put on an old cartoon. You didn’t bother with supper. Something about being here and feeling the air on the side of the house nearest to June’s house turned your stomach. You’d pick something good up at the restaurant tomorrow, maybe. This seemed like another apple pie situation.

There was a quiet knock on the door, and Jack let himself in. “Hey. Uh, I can come back later.”


Jack shut the door behind him and leaned against it with a sigh. “She’s at work. I’m grounded. And I’m not expressly forbidden from talking to you or Miko, but it was pretty much implied.”

“Jesus.” You winced. “I’m really sorry.”

He shrugged. “It was gonna blow up sooner or later. You did your best. Raf told me what happened, is everything…?”

“Everyone’s fine,” you promised. “Just shaken up. Arcee’s not happy you aren’t around, but…yeah. We’re surviving.”

“Figures.” Jack looked miserable.

“It’ll be alright,” you said, bracingly. “Fowler says that as soon as they can confirm she’s isolated from any weird contacts--”
“Here’s the thing, though. She’s not.” Jack laughed, bitterly. “I took a look at that email? It had a phone number to call. And it was written down. She saved it. She called it. Who knows what she’s been hearing from those people.”

“Christ. Jack...” You should have told her months ago. You should have talked it over with Optimus, what had you been thinking?

“And you know what the worst part is?” He sighed, one arm covering his eyes. “She believed a bunch of creepy, stalker-y strangers over me. That’s how much I damaged her trust.”

“This isn’t your fault, bud.” You stood up and pulled him into a hug. “And it’s gonna be okay. June’s smart.”

“She’s scared.” Jack said into your shoulder. “And I’m scared of her being scared. Scared people do... horrible, stupid stuff. I don’t even know if she’d keep their secret now, after everything.”

You wished you had something comforting to say. “Your mom’s smart. And for now, at least, everyone’s safe, and everyone will be safe if we keep our heads and stay together. Ratchet’s gonna give you a second phone to call the Bots with. We’re not leaving you out to dry.”

“Yeah. That’d be—that’s be good.” Jack drew back, wiping his eyes inconspicuously. “I should get back. If she finds out I was over here, she’d gonna be even more pissed at you.”

“Fair. Sleep well, bud. Get some rest.”

“Yeah.” He pulled the door closed behind him. “Sure.”

Chapter End Notes

Mr. Wen: I don't care about Callighan.
The Universe: *implies that something bad might possibly happen to Mr. Callighan, even theoretically*
Mr. Wen: NO YOU STOP THAT RIGHT N--
Big Sky Observatory

Chapter Summary

A strip of land in High River, Alberta, Canada. Maintained by the Big Sky Astronomical Society, the location was chosen for its extreme minimal light pollution and relative accessibility. Visitors can go to make use of the observatory's telescope, under a truly darkened night sky.

Chapter Notes

PLEASE NOTE: This is the SECOND CHAPTER posted this week! Please check out chapter 24 first, or you'll be very confused.
This marks the start of the next storyline, which I'm very excited about. As a result, this chapter kind of...swelled a thousand words past where it was supposed to be?? So that's fun. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ratchet was scowling.

Normally, this wasn’t so much of an indicator of trouble as it was a cosmic fact. Today, however, Ratchet was scowling explicitly and definitively at Optimus; and if that wasn’t a sign that something was out of alignment with the stars or the planets or whatever, nothing was.

“Well.” Arcee stopped a respectful distance away, taking in their body language. Optimus’ was, as always, about as expressive as your average wall; but Ratchet's was closed off and sullen, arms folded unconsciously across his chest. He’d been using the atmospheric package for a little too long. “This feels a little ominous,” she ventured. “Who died?”

Ratchet grumbled wordlessly. Optimus shot him a gentle, beseeching look: please don’t undermine me. It was entertaining, in an immediately concerning sort of way.

“No one has died,” Optimus said. “We do, however, have a mission for you.”

Ah. So it was a case of who was about to die. Arcee felt the proverbial ground stabilize beneath her feet. She could swing this.

“It’s not an assassination,” Ratchet said, like the killjoy he was. “Rather the opposite.”

Well, she could do that, too. “Another bodyguard detail, huh. Did we find another kid while I was on patrol, or…”?

“Cute,” Ratchet snapped. “If you’ve gotten all the pithy remarks out of your systems, we need you to escort our newest human across the country.”

“Okay.” Arcee glanced at Optimus, looking for signs of what was actually happening. There were
precious few. “I thought they were staying here for the holiday.”

“They will be traveling on a mission in our own interests,” Optimus explained. “You will remember the Griffin Rock Project, I trust.”

“Sure.” Some little research facility off the coast had been awarded first dibs on whatever Cybertronian tech the Autobots felt like bringing for show-and-tell. Arcee had been tangentially related in the talks, but she hadn’t honestly anticipated anything coming of it. The humans had a tendency to overreach, and Optimus had a zero tolerance policy for reinforcing that tendency.

“It’s been decided,” Ratchet said, in a tone that added not by me. “That they—and you—will be representing the Autobots in a formal visit to the facility. No binding action will take place, but the two of you will essentially be reaffirming that the facilities are up to the quality they’ve boasted.”

Arcee waited for either of them to elaborate. Neither did. “They’re...don’t get me wrong, they’re lovely. But they aren’t qualified for this. Why are they coming along at all? Why not Fowler?”

“Agent Fowler will be occupied,” Optimus said inexorably. “In his place, you will need someone to inspect those places you cannot.”

“I turn into a motorcycle,” Arcee said, flatly. “Which is smaller than a human. I’m also the only personnel on base with a half-decent holoform.” Ratchet made an unhappy noise, but didn't interrupt.

“Sir, with all due respect, why are you trying to get rid of the rookie for a day?”

“Try four days,” Ratchet put in, with a spiteful sort of helpfulness. “You’ll be bridging to New Hampshire, and driving the rest of the way.”

Arcee shot Optimus a look. He didn’t have the decency to look properly caught, but he did switch which foot held the majority of his weight. Small victories. “There is certainly an alternate element to this assignment. Their conduct will provide data on their performance in higher-stakes missions along these same lines. They are charismatic. They enjoy people. Their presence along the periphery of more serious negotiations would be invaluable.” Optimus' expression sobered from serious to very serious. “Furthermore, the chance to visit old friends and family will help them recover from the trials of the last week.”

“Hard to argue with that, I guess.” Arcee didn't think they had looked up far enough to make eye contact with her in three days. “Just a milk run?”

Ratchet stepped back in. “Until such time as you see something at Griffin Rock worth reporting, yes.”

“Neat.” she suppressed a sigh. “Who’s got Darby duty while I’m gone?”

“Bulkhead will cover for you,” Optimus promised.

Arcee was under no delusions as to why she was the one being sent off for the weekend. She was upset. She was volatile. It had been...hard, effectively ignoring the Darby situation. She still talked with Jack whenever she could, but it wasn’t the same as having the kid around. Perhaps a break would cool her down some. “I guess that’s that, then.”

“Dismissed, soldier.”

She turned on her heel, ignoring the sour look Ratchet shot Optimus. They'd either hash it out quickly, or quietly stew about it for the rest of forever. Either way, not her circus, not her monkeys.
Arcee rounded the corner and ducked through the open doorway of the medbay. “So how much of that did you hear?”

“Oh, you know,” said the newbie, legs swinging off the edge of the shelf. “Enough.” Their laptop was closed on the seat next to them, obviously having been set aside in favor of listening.

All of it, then. Arcee leaned against the table. “Thoughts?”

They shrugged. “I mean. Pity's not my favorite emotion to inspire in other people, but it's better than some. And I'd like to help out. Are you gonna want to be away for so long?”

“They'll manage for four days. It'll be nice to meet your family, even if it's from the driveway.” That, and it would be nice to have the human looking upbeat again. They didn't wear mopey well.

They smiled, dryly. “They'd love you guys.” They stretched, standing with a creak of stiff joints. “Think I should go and own up to listening?”

“Let them sweat for a while.”

…

A few hours later, Ratchet stuck his head in. “We have a--”

You set your packed bag on the sofa next to you without looking up. “Yup.”

Ratchet processed this. “Arcee told you.”

“Nope.”

“You were listening?”

You made a so-so motion with your hand. “Your voices carry like nobody's business in here. Especially yours.”

He harrumphed at you. “Will you be able to get time off from work?”

“I get Thanksgiving break.” Mostly to make up for how busy the company was around Christmas, but still.

“Mm. Well, that was settled surprisingly painlessly.”

“We've reached our drama quota for the month, actually.” You pulled your bag closer, shoving your laptop into the sleeve. “No more until December.”

…

“Miko, c'mon,” groused Jack through the phone.

Miko pulled back from yet another hug. Jack was skyping in to see you off, but Miko's inability to hold the camera steady seemed to be detracting from the experience somewhat. “Sorry, dude.”

You slung your bag over your shoulder, since it finally looked like you were done with hugs. “It's only four days, you guys. And you can call whenever you like.”

“You're sure you have everything?” Bulkhead said. Again.
“One human, accounted for.” Arcee rolled her eyes. “Four days of energon, present. Gosh, I nearly forgot my swimsuit.”

“I've got it, Bulkhead.” You appreciated being worried over, but hopefully having you gone would get everyone to stop mothering you for a while. You were only emotionally fragile.

Bee chittered at you. “Say hi to your family for us.” Raf dutifully translated. “Not, you know, the ‘us’ part, but send our regards.”

“You got it.” you shot both of them a smile. “I'll bring back some whoopie pies or something.”

Miko grinned. “Yeah!”

“What're—never mind,” said Jack through the phone. “Just be safe, you too.”

“You got it.” Arcee transformed, clearly ready to go.

You hopped on, backpack securely fastened, but before you put your helmet on, you caught Optimus' eyes from where he was lingering at the back of the room, apart from the group. Before you could think better of it, you shot him a reassuring smile.

You put the helmet on before you could get a good look, but you thought he nodded back.

The ground bridge swirled to life in a fantastic burst of bluish energy. You gaped, unashamed, as Arcee locked up speed, craning your head back to stare at the ceiling flashing in coruscating patterns above you. It felt prickly there, like holding your hand too close to a staticky blanket. You remembered what Ratchet had told you about how bridging actually worked, and did your best to remember that this wasn't literally magic.

All at once, the glow of the bridge flashed even brighter; and suddenly you were inhaling a breath of cold, wet, salty air. As you blinked away the afterimage of the flash, your eyes fell on the looming outline of Portsmouth Harbor, rising over the familiar gloomy grey of the river. The blocky outline of an ocean liner swallowed up most of your view of the shipyard, casting an enormous shadow through the mist. You craned your neck back and gazed up at the bridge connecting Maine to New Hampshire, the tell-tale rush of highway speeds just barely filtering down to your ears. Against your backs, the edge of the forest darkened the sky. Even without their leaves, the trees cast the fog-drenched undergrowth into darkness.

“Huh,” said Arcee, sounding vaguely disappointed. “This is farther north than I was hoping. We'll have to double back to get to your old house.”

“I--” You swallowed, eyes stinging. The smell, the cold air, the trees… “I need a second.”

“Sure.” Arcee killed her engine for now, balancing in place. You blinked back the tears that were threatening to fill your eyes, feeling supremely stupid for being nostalgic for New Hampshire in November.

As far as bouts of homesickness went, you supposed that on your way to visit was about as good a time as any.

Once the cold air stinging your cheeks had effectively killed any remnant of affection you still held for New England winter, Arcee took off for the bridge. You had never actually ridden a motorcycle at highway speeds, but you suspected the fact that you didn't have to do much more than hang on and enjoy the view helped.
The radio in your helmet crackled on, so that Arcee could talk to you without speaking out loud. “So, this is where you lived,” she commented, as you passed over the river. “This is cheerful.”

“It gets better in the summer,” you said. In the far, far distance, the foothills of the nearest mountain range were only barely visible. “Although we actually lived out in the sticks, so this isn’t really the same.”

“I assumed. You get a lot of light pollution?”

“Well, it’s sure not Jasper, but we made do. I think my family mainly wanted to be near the ocean and also not in Texas, but other than that, there wasn’t a lot of other qualifiers for finding places to live.” You paused. “Not that my family hates Texas. My grandparents were just a little tired of it after nearly three decades in Houston.”

The two of you chatted idly for the next forty-five minutes. Eventually, Arcee turned off the highway and into a town, which lasted for about ten minutes before it dissolved into wooded back roads. You had to point out the driveway for her, but other than that, the two of you arrived at your old house without incident.

You had to swallow back another bout of nostalgia, as the familiar outline of the little faded farmhouse came into view.

“This is cute,” Arcee said, politely.

Whether or not Arcee understood the parameters of what constituted a cute Earth house, was up for debate, but it was sweet of her anyway. Besides, she was right. “I’ll go ahead and open the garage, let you get out of the cold.”

The door was locked. You knocked, fishing your keys out of your pocket. After a few moments had passed, you went ahead and unlocked it yourself.

The moment you stepped inside, your heartrate skyrocketed.

The house was still and unlit, cold with the chill of a full night without heating. You couldn’t ever remember coming home to a dark house, even when the entire family was gone. Your dad liked to leave lights on to greet you.

You closed the door, gently, and hurried back to Arcee. “Something’s wrong. No one’s home.”

She stood upright on her tires, ignoring the kickstand. “It couldn’t just be a trip to the store or something? You didn’t call ahead.”

“Might be.” You dialed your grandmother’s number. It rang. And rang. “Shit.”

“Take it easy.” Arcee warned. “Don’t panic. Call your dad.”

“Okay. Okay.” You drew a sharp breath, listening to the beat of your own heart in your ears. You had to focus to hit his name in your contacts; your hands were shaking.

The line clicked. “Hello?”

“Dad!” You sighed in relief, tension draining out of your entire body. “Are you alright? What’s going on?”

“What?” He sounded surprised. “How did you—did your grandpa call you?”
“I called him a few days ago, but not since. I got some time off, so I came down to surprise you.” You winced. “I guess. I should have...probably called ahead. The house is dark, what's up?”

Arcee transformed trusting the cover of the trees for privacy. She sat on the sidewalk next to you, lowering her head to eavesdrop.

“There's...” Dad sighed. “Oh boy. Okay. Your grandmother asked that we didn't tell you until after, kiddo, I'm sorry.” His voice went careful and modulated, like he was trying to keep you calm through pointed example. “We had to fly down to Pennsylvania. Your grandmother's having a surgery done.”

“She's...” All the blood rushed into your ears and back out. “She's having a what?”

Arcee jerked back, grimacing at your volume.

“The day before last, she went to the doctor for some dizzy spells.” Your dad went on, gently. “She was diagnosed with a middle ear infection that had taken on some complications, so we were referred to a specialist. An old friend of your mother's. He made room for us immediately, we have nothing to worry about.”

“You...” There was a knot of fear and worry and anger and sheer, unadulterated frustration stewing in your stomach. Why was nothing simple? Why was everything such a federal issue all the time? “Mom knew, too? How long—why didn’t you tell me?”

“Grandma didn't want to worry you until it was all over. You sounded so tired when you talked to Grandpa, we've been worried—”

“You—you've been worried.” You fought the urge to spike your phone into the asphalt. “How is—I don't—I can't. I just can't, Dad. What if it had gotten worse? Would you have told me then?”

Your voice was rising. You tore the phone away from your ear before he could answer and bit your sleeve, hard. You weren't going to scream, you weren't going to cry, you were going to deal with this like an adult, dammit all.

Arcee delicately lifted your phone out of your hand and drew you over so that you were leaning against her leg. You sat with your back to her shin, and focused on breathing normally.

She tapped at the screen, setting it to loudspeaker. “Hello? Sir, My name's Arcee, I'm a friend.”

“Hi, R.C.,” Your dad said automatically. “Uh...”

“Good evening,” she said, military crisp. “We're going to call you back. Before we do, though, can you tell us a little more about the surgery?”

Your dad outlined the details. She was going in tomorrow afternoon. The doctors were some of the best. If the infection went untreated, she could started to lose her sense of equilibrium as well as hearing damage. With the surgery, they would possibly save her sense of balance, but there was already damage done to her hearing on that side, and they couldn't predict how that would be affected. Yes, it was all perfectly safe. No, a myringotomy hadn't helped at all.

Yes, someone would have told you the moment she hit recovery. He was sorry. He loved you.

You were going to hurt someone.

Arcee hung up the phone. “Okay. Not the most auspicious start.”
You pulled your hood over your head. The cold asphalt bit at your legs through your trousers. You weren't calming down, you realized distantly.

“What do you need?” she asked, after a pause.

“...A hug.” Your voice broke.

Thin, sharpened metal fingers loosely folded over you, lacing over your torso. You tucked yourself into a ball, breathing as evenly as possible, but you were sure she felt you shaking.

You were so, so tired of breaking down like this, but—but it was your grandmother. You hadn't even known—you had been continuing on your merry little way, a continent's width away, and if something had happened--

(At least this time it wasn't your fault.

That thought made you cry harder.)

Once the worst of the anxiety attack had passed, and you were no longer breathing in teary, snotty gulps of air, you uncurled yourself and peered up at Arcee. “Thanks.”

“That looked nasty.” She handed you a tissue from god-only-know-where. “Does that happen a lot?”

“It used to.” You blew your nose miserably, ignoring the wary look Arcee was shooting you. “Not for a good decade or so. Can I ask you something?”

“Kid, I would literally fight the Decepticon High Command for that not to happen again.”

“Promise that if you get a middle ear infection, you'd tell me so that I could come and help.”

She snorted. “Sure thing.”

The two of you sat in silence.

“Is it just me, or has November just sucked unequivocally?” You gestured vaguely. “Like, October had its ups and downs, but fuck November. You'd think it was an election year or something.”

“That's how it goes sometimes. Hopefully things will settle down now.” Arcee brushed the top of your head with the flattened side of her fingers. “You ready to call your dad back?”

“Mm.” You held your hands out for your phone. “If anyone asks, I handled this with the utmost dignity.”

“Hey, no screaming. That puts you ahead of Ratchet.”

Chapter End Notes

Reader: you want me to go to Maine.
The Autobots: Yes.
Reader: In late November.
The Autobots: Yes.
Reader: On a motorcycle. With the bitter wind rushing past my face.
The Autobots: Yes.
Reader: For a six-hour drive.
The Autobots: Yes. Sound good?
Reader, a Good Sport: Yeah, why not.
Orbit

Chapter Summary

The movement of an object around a celestial body. An orbit is made out of two forces: the pull of the gravity of the celestial body (proportional to its mass) and the forward momentum of the object.

Chapter Notes

The garden is finally, finally starting to be planted, which means that my weekends are going to be a lot less of a clown show. Planting and weeding takes up a lot less of the day than cutting sod and shoveling peat gravel. Hopefully, this will mean that updates will come out at a reasonable time of day, and not, you know. Nearly tomorrow. Happy Pride Month! Please enjoy this chapter about Thanksgiving. And if you're in the States, look into how you can support your local native american reservation, because it's also Indigenous People's Month and a chapter about Thanksgiving seems like a good time to point that out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kiddo, I'm sorry,” Dad said, again.

You sighed. Arcee had sort of just…set you down on top of her shin, foot flexed so that you could fit in the curve of her ankle. You weren’t sure why sitting on her hard metal leg was supposed to be better than the ground, but the least you could do was humor her. At least she was warmer. “I'm not looking for an apology, necessarily. I just want to know why. It can't just be because Grandpa said I sounded tired, that's nuts.”

“Ordinarily, I'd agree with that,” Dad said, dryly. “Except that we got a call from an—an Agent Fowler?”

“Oh my god. Yeah, I know him.”

“Yeah. He basically just told us you were okay, and not to worry. So you can imagine the results.”

“Great.” you sighed. “Did you call Mom?”

“Oh yeah, she’s here for all of this. You wanna talk to her?”

“No, that's—”

“Who’s here for the what now?” Your mother said, in the background. “Who’s on the phone?”

“One sec.” He covered the receiver.

You shot Arcee a despairing look.
She smirked at you, drily amused. “People care about you. That’s how it works, kiddo.”

“Don’t you start.” The last thing you needed was your childhood nicknames being spread all over Nevada.

“Hey, sweets,” Your mother said, much too cheerily. Dad must have given her the phone.

“Hey, Mom.” You swung your legs, hitting the side of Arcee’s ankle with a dull, rhythmic thumping. “Called you in from overseas, huh?”

“Yeah.” She had the grace to sound remorseful, at least. “I’m sorry you didn’t get told right off the bat---”

“We can talk about it later. Right now, I need to know what’s going on.”

She sighed. “Well, we’re getting her preparatory exam out of the way, at present. She’s in the green so far. If it makes you feel any better, she’ll be on the pre-surgery diet until the main event. You know she hates that.”

People were severely overestimating how vindictive you were feeling. Were you secretly super duper petty, somehow, without having noticed it yourself? Had you done something to convince your friends and family that your immediate reaction to your grandmother is having surgery done and made a bad call would be good, let the hag suffer? “Mom. Hard and fast details. Go.”

She outlined the procedure in a few easily understood sentences. It was about as risk-free as sharp implements poking near the brain could be; which was saying something, given the quality of the doctors.

“They’re basically scanning right now for any harmful bacteria,” she explained. “Actually, the samples they’re taking right now are a little like what I sometimes work with—ooh, here she comes. You want to stay on the line?”

“Yeah. Actually, let her know I’m here.”

The connection muffled, as your mother muffled the receiver with her hand. There were a few moments of muffled voices, before you very clearly heard, “They’re where?!?”

Arcee leaned closer, interested. “Which one’s the shrill one?”

“The shrill one who’s audible through my mom’s hand is my grandmother. The lower-toned one is my dad, and the quieter one is my mom, and if you listen—hear how there’s a voice that keeps getting cut off and re-starting the sentence?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s Grandpa. He was raised polite. Which isn’t a bad thing, but he married my grandmother. Who wasn’t.”

“Hey, kiddo.” Your father was back. “So, your grandmother’s happy to hear you’re safe, but she wants to re-iterate that you need to focus on the more immediate stuff first---”

“Don’t you go editorializing me! What I said was that I wasn’t sorry and that they needed to prioritize their own damn well-being! Tell ‘em to stay in their lane!”

“Hon, that’s a little---” started your grandfather.
“Mom, I’m not saying that. Your phone is right there if you need to swear at them.” said Dad.

“Hon, that’s a little bit harsh—”

“Dad, it’s okay. You guys know that speakerphone means I can hear most of everything everyone’s saying, right?”

“And tell them that the next cross-country coup they try to pull better be better planned than that, for god’s sake, what if we’d turned off the hot water--!”

“In the winter?”

“Okay. Okay.” You kept your voice down with an effort. Arcee’s shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter. You stuck your tongue out at her. There was a reason you had moved across the country. “Guys—Dad? Do me a favor and tell Grandma that she was the one who encouraged me to make my own decisions in the first place. And that--”

“Kiddo, c’mon.”

“Oh, I can hear them just fine! You tell them that they’ve got bigger fish to fry--”

“Oh my God, are you serious?” You buried your face in your free hand. “If I wrote home and told you I had so much as sprained something, all four of you would fly to Nevada! In a heartbeat! Are you seriously telling me I shouldn’t have the same reaction? Don’t I deserve that?”

“Kiddo, calm down--”

“They’ve got a point.”

“Enough from the peanut gallery. Mom, the waiting room’s not the place for this, let’s at least head outside.”

“You have more important things to--”

Bull. “If you really wanted me to exercise my own independence,” you snapped, voice cold and clear only by way of how angry you felt, “You would let me make my own damn decisions about what and what not to worry about.”

There was a clear, ringing silence. It was starting to snow.

You glanced up at Arcee. She looked supremely uncomfortable.

“Okay,” said your dad, eventually. “So as fun as this has been, I think we need some cool-down time. You still have your friend with you, kiddo?”

“Yeah, Dad.” You smiled wanly. “Arcee's still nearby.”

He paused. “How nearby?”

You held up the phone.

“Hello,” Arcee said, obediently.

You could hear the muffled voices of the others, but your father seemed to have moves the phone away from them for now. “Jesus. Well, you two stick close together, you hear?”
“Yeah, Dad.” You sighed. “Tell everyone I love ‘em. And I promise to only strangle you all a little.”

“Best we could hope for. Love you.”

“You too, Dad.” You hung up.

Well. You supposed feeling irritated, rather than betrayed and panicky, was a net gain. Of a sorts.

Eventually, you slid your phone back into your pocket and stood up, groaning after so long sitting on the cold asphalt. “So, yeah. Thanks for your help.”

“No problem.”

You peered up at her. “Are you—stop chuckling, Jesus! My life is not your daytime television program!”

“Someone’s feeling better,” Arcee commented dryly. “Your family is adorable.”

“We live to entertain.” You popped your back, wincing. “Ow. God. So I guess they’re not going to be back until after we have to leave, so I guess we’re pretty much clear to head North?”

“Let’s stay the night. We have time.” Arcee folded herself back into a motorcycle. “There’s some kind of holiday tomorrow, right? Let’s do something fun.”

You thought about it. Some hardcore cooking actually sounded pretty good right now. “Sure. You up for a trip to the store?”

She flicked a side mirror at you. “Like I’m going to be doing any actual shopping.”

…

“Ma’am? Security breach in the northernmost barrier. Whatever it is breached the outer shell.”

“Put it on screen.” She waited for the visual to appear, and hissed. “Arachnid. Lovely. Prowl, Windblade, what do you have on her?”

Windblade shook her head, but Prowl stepped forward. “She’s classified first and foremost as a Decepticon-leaning Neutral, general. Her place of birth is a matter of some conjecture, but her combative career had been well-documented. Sending files to your tablet.”

She glanced them over, scrolling down to the casualties list. “I know this one. One of your proteges, wasn’t she? She and Tailgate were a wonder duo.”

“Arcee has always forged her own path, Ma’am,” said Prowl, a tad stiffly. “You might remember her work from the battle at Polyhex.”

“Which ones?”

“All of them, general.”

Was there a hint of pride in Prowl’s voice? She couldn’t be sure. “It sounds like our visitor really must be something, then.”

Windblade cleared her throat. “Shall I send the guard?”

“No. Send Ultra Magnus. He has experience with this sort of assignment.” Elita One considered.
“And I’ll go. I’ve always done well with spiders.”

You picked up a rotisserie chicken and the fixings for stuffing and pie at the Hannafords, and opened the window over the sink so that you could chat with Arcee while everything baked. Under other circumstances, it would have been depressing, cooking only for you in a house that should have been filled with happy, loud people, but Arcee did a good job of being conspicuous company by herself.

“That looks disgusting,” she said, leaning in for a closer look.

“It's stuffing,” you explained. “It gets a lot better once you cook it.”

“What does it stuff?”

“Ostensibly? The bird.” You eyed the decidedly modest chicken on the counter. “But I'm thinking I'll just use a pan. It's supposed to soak up the juices from the meat, make it taste better.”

“Huh.” Arcee processed this. “Is it alright if I tell the others what happened?”

You glanced up at her, hands covered in beef and bread. “What? Sure, I guess. Don't, like, make a big deal out of it or anything, but it's not a secret—”

You were cut off when your phone vibrated itself off the counter. A moment later, Miko's number appeared on the screen. “Arcee.”

She shrugged. “You said it was okay.”

You hastily scrubbed your hands under hot water. “It's traditional that you ask before spilling the beans—dammmit—” You stooped to grab for your phone with dripping hands. Water was marginally better than beef and bread bits. Marginally. “Hello?”

The burst of noise that erupted from your phone nearly made you drop it. You held it a good distance away from your head, horrified and a little bit impressed. If you listened, you could make out individual voices. You were pretty sure both Bulkhead and Miko were yelling in Japanese, and Ratchet was swearing in Cybertronian again. “Wow.”

“We're invested in you,” Arcee said, with the satisfaction of one who has spilled the juiciest gossip. “Also, we don't get out much. This is probably the first actually interesting thing to happen since we left.”

“We've been gone like four hours!” You stared incredulously at your phone, which was still making hell noises.

“ENOUGH.”

The chatter went abruptly silent.

You blinked. “Was that Optimus?”

“Yup.” Arcee lounged against the house, looking largely unconcerned and a little impressed. Probably because she wasn’t one of the ones in trouble.

“I don't think I've ever heard someone speak in all-caps before.”

“He does that. Handy in battle. I think it's some kind of amplifier mod, but he modulates it so that it
completely overrides every other noise in the area. It's like yelling in white noise. Is that supposed to be beeping?”

The pie was done. You took it out of the oven, phone cradled between your head and your shoulder. “Uh, hello?”

“Miko, if you wouldn’t mind,” Optimus said distantly, at a much less existentially rattling volume. There was a quiet, slightly shaken here you go, man, as Miko handed the phone over. “Greetings. Are you well?”

“Yeah, I'm okay. Arcee was a good sport about helping out.” You stuck a toothpick into the pie. “Is—is everything okay? You all sounded like a circus.”

“Oh, you guys. No, it's okay. My mom's probably gonna be sending me updates now. It was just...a shock. We have a schedule to keep, anyway.”

“She had better,” grumbled Ratchet. “What's the name of this surgeon?”

“Guys.” You sighed, a hint of a hysterical giggle escaping before you could stop it. “I need to preface this by saying that I love you all very much? I do not need this to get more complicated than it already is. I'm gonna eat dinner, I'm gonna show Arcee the Charlie Brown Thanksgiving special, and then tomorrow I'm going to do the job you asked me to do. I'm an adult, and you don't have to worry about me.”

“I thought you said this was supposed to relax them,” Raf said, almost too quietly to hear.

“Hush, Rafael.” Ratchet said, significantly louder.

You were almost impressed. Miko's phone had an incredible pickup range.

“What's on the agenda back home?” Arcee called through the window.

“We've discovered the wreck of a Cybertronian vessel in one of the far northern regions of this planet,” Ratchet said. “We're planning a more thorough investigation over the next few days, although it may be some time before we can reach it.”

“A wreck?” Arcee perked up.

“Centuries old, we suspect. We'll keep you updated.”

“Maybe we'll have something to send over to Griffin Rock while you're there, huh?” Bulkhead said, cheerfully.

You shot your phone a look. “Are you all hunched over Miko's phone like a bunch of kids trying to look into the same microscope?”

“Yes. Yes, they are.” Miko sounded less than amused.

“Half of you have phones built into your brains—never mind. How's Jack?”

Jack was fine. Wheeljack had called in earlier, and he said hi. There wasn't a lot going on from the
sound of it, other than prepping for the excavation effort; but that was still a couple days off. When you hung up the phone, you felt so much better, it was a little scary.

Arcee looked smug enough that you didn't say that out loud, however.

...  

You sat out in the garage to eat, sofa dragged out to the little television Grandpa kept out there so he could watch the news. Your family had never been religious—or even that enamored with Thanksgiving as a holiday, given the actual historical basis of it—so you kept it casual. The Peanuts Thanksgiving special was followed by Iron Man, at Arcee's request; and then by Captain America and Thor. None of these were particularly seasonal, but it was delightful to watch Arcee be riveted by movies you had over-watched years ago. She added combat commentary, you picked apart plot holes and came up with watsonian reasons for them; and the both of you snickered at the dramatic story lines.

“Is my life a superhero movie?” Arcee mused, well into the night. “Because it kind of feels like it, but if someone else is the protagonist.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” you said, with feeling. “It's Optimus, right?”

“What--? Oh, I guess. He could be the leading role. I think he's more like...ugh. Idris Elba's character in Pacific Rim? You know the guy.”

“I do. Uh. Dammit. Pen...Pentecost? Commander...Director Pentecost?”

“Something like that.” Arcee criss-crossed her legs, considering your family's Vudu selection.

“You know, I can see that.” Your brain rewound. “Wait. You've seen Pacific Rim?”

“Yeah? It's awesome. I haven't seen the second one, though. I heard it has a bittersweet ending. I'm waiting for them to announce the third.”

“Huh.” you mulled this over. You weren't sure why the fact that your friend had watched an action flick about giant robots and aliens was so surprising to you, given that she was in fact a giant alien robot with a fondness for action flicks. “What'd you think?”

“The main character was a little weak, but nice enough. The scientists were fun. And the robots in the movie actually reminded me of some of the living cities we had on Cybertron.”

“Bullshit you had Jaegers on Cybertron.” You grinned into your blanket, ridiculously cheered by the idea. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. It's pretty tough to invade a city when the city can stand up and stomp on you.”

“I guess.” You thought back to the original point. “You know, if Optimus is Pentecost, maybe you are the protagonist.”

“Meh. Maybe Bee.” she considered. “Or actually, you know who really fits the bill?”

“Yeah?”

“Bulkhead. He's got the origin story--”

“He does?” You had specifically not pried into Bulkhead's past. “Wait, don't tell me, that's a private thing.”
“He's a blunt-force fighter--”

“Not all superheroes are...well, actually.”

“Yeah. And he's got the sidekick. …Uh.”

You laughed. “Miko isn't allowed to be a superhero protagonist until she's old enough to drive. And even then, she'd turn evil.”


“...I'm kind of in a Pacific Rim mood, now.”

“That works.”

Chapter End Notes

Phone calls: no one here knows how to have a normal one.
Dark Energy

Chapter Summary

An unknown form of energy theorized to accelerate the expansion of the universe. Although largely theoretical, dark energy is thought to be the most common form of energy in the universe.

Chapter Notes

The plot progresses.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You couldn’t read the sign.

The world rotated on its side, and suddenly you knew even without the lettering over the awning that the building in front of you was Wen's Diner. But it was...it was nearly unrecognizable. For lack of a better term, it looked bombed out; although the structure itself seemed sound. It was everything else that had seemed to have been utterly destroyed. The siding, the windows, the electrical lights—it was as if someone had meticulously gone through and ruined whatever they could find without altering the general silhouette of the building.

You stepped through the door, avoiding the broken glass glittering against the tarmac like stars; and glanced around the interior through the small, curiously intact window in the door. The dining room looked more or less pristine, if abandoned. Someone was sitting in the booth farthest from the door.

You let yourself in, nervous questions burning a hole in your throat. You hadn't spent all that much time here, really; not in the general scheme of things. And yet the sight of the carnage left you feeling bereft; empty, even. You felt like you were in mourning.

Your foot hit something acidic, almost sticky.

You recoiled. The neat black and white tiling Mr. Wen had kept more or less pristine the entire time you had been in Jasper was absolutely covered in glistening black footsteps, each burned into the tile like a brand. Some areas were barely touched; but others were pitted and scarred, pock-marked from countless trips to and fro the kitchen, the register, the walkways.

You checked your own feet before entering. The soles of your shoes were clean, but you had no doubt that if your feet fell in one of those prints, it wouldn't be good for either your shoe or the floor. You did your best to avoid the footprints, but there was just too many of them. Glittering black soot—slime?—clung to the cuffs of your jeans as you passed.

The figure in the farthest booth raised their head to watch you tiptoe awkwardly towards them, hopping stubbornly from bare spot from bare spot. “That’s a sweet sentiment, dear, but I’m afraid it doesn’t really matter where you step. The paths were worn in a long, long time ago. The damage was done.”
The old woman in the tie-dye dress was instantly recognizable—Jass, Jasper's oldest resident. She was a sweet, kind old lady; a tad stand-offish, maybe, but she had a fondness for children and misfits, and once you had been polite to her she had never once failed to be polite to you. She was a janitor at the school, you thought you’d heard.

“The damage?” you echoed. Your voice sounded horrified. (Were you horrified?) You felt like the heart had been bored out of you. “Jass, what happened? Why is it so...” You gestured at the footprints.

“Has anyone ever told you that you have a magnificent mind for simile?” Jass mused aloud. She sat up, gesturing at the building at large. “This place is a metaphor. Which isn't precisely a simile, but it translates better over this medium. You could say it's like a simile."

“A metaphor for what?” You sat down. Or suddenly you just were sitting, although you didn’t remember sliding into the booth.

“For Jasper, of course.” She sighed, letting her hands flutter back down. “An awful lot of people have lived in Jasper. Not compared to some places, certainly, but maybe more than it was meant to hold. Like a jam jar. Enough people live and die and leave something behind, and eventually, the jam jar fills up.” She gestured at the floors. “The footprints aren’t the only things they leave, but they’re the most noticeable. Look closer.”

Something cold and primal stuck in your chest, like you were trying to inch your fingers towards a hot stove without the rest of you noticing. “I don’t want to.”

Jass nodded sympathetically. “No one ever does. You really do love Jasper, don’t you? You don’t want it to be a bad place. You ever see Twin Peaks, hon?”

“I—yeah?”

“Or the book IT, by Steven King,” Jass mused. “They’re both about towns with something rotten in the dirt. Something evil so indelible that if you removed the evil, all that’d be left was unconnected pieces. Like quilt squares. You know sign language, kiddo?”

“No.” you said, through molasses. It was getting harder to think, but you were definitely slowing down. Like a lagging computer. “I don’t think so.”

“Learn.” Her fingertips brushed over the palm of her opposite hand, before swooping up into a loose salute by her forehead. “It’s a good skill to pick up, you know, even if your granny doesn’t wind up needing it in the end. But there’s also something good, in those stories, isn’t there? Something wise and old. Not necessarily nice, but kind. Something out there that’s rooting for the heroes.” Jass sipped from a teacup that didn’t belong in Wen’s Diner. It was a delicate, pristine white porcelain, molded so delicately that the rim looked sharp. Bone china. “Something dissimilar, but not disinterested.”

“Jasper isn’t like that, though,” you protested weakly. “We aren’t like a—a hotspot for anything, ghosts and stuff. It’s a real place, full of real people. It’s not a David Lynch show.”

“It hasn’t been for a while,” Jass hummed. “but the earth is old, and she remembers. A lot can happen in a few billion years. You are not the first one to love this place for its view of the stars.”

You shook your head. “You’re making this sound like a bad horror novel. Am I supposed to believe that—what? The land’s cursed, or something?”

“Not even sort of. Although the ones who burned those footsteps in there originally may have
thought so. They certainly deserved it, even if their children and their childrens' children wouldn't have. But no, nothing so mundane."

“But nothing happens here.” you said, dumbly. “Other than, you know. Exception that proves the rule aside.”

“Doesn't it?” Jass shot you a hard look. “Isn't it strange, so many colorful personalities in a few square miles? The Wens and Callighan, Miko Nakadai, Nancy the hermit? You? Your family? And don't play coy, you know very well which family I mean. You are all drawn to this place. And you aren't only ones.”

“This is insane.” You started to get up. The world gave a disgruntled little shimmy, like a dog twitching to dislodge a fly; and you sat back down heavily. “We don't need more complications. Why can't everything just leave us alone?”

“You could leave.” Jass suggested, innocently. “Any time you like. The one thing Jasper doesn't have is a barrier around it.”

“Fuck you,” you said, reflexively, and clapped a hand over your mouth in horror. “I—I’m sorry--”

“Yes,” she said, pleased. “That's why you're here in the first place, aren't you?”

You buried your face in your hands. It was like you were reacting to things you weren't consciously aware of; insults and compliments you couldn't hear. “Jass, why're you telling me this?”

“Because you need to know,” she said, suddenly sober. “Because very soon, if you want to understand what's happening, you will need to know the nature of this place and places like it. And in order for you to begin, I need you to answer a question.”


“What is your name?”

You told her. “Is this some kind of fae thing? Like in Irish mythology?”

“Don't be silly, fairies don't exist. You didn't answer my question.”

You said your name, even more clearly. “Don't wear it out. Why, though, what does that have to do with anything?”

“Spell it,” Jass insisted.

You blinked. “What?”

“Spell it. Go on. Take your time, if you need to. We're in no rush.”

“It...I mean--” Your vision fuzzed. “It starts with...”

“How many letters does it have?” Jass pressed. “Do you go by a nickname? What about your last name, where's your family from?”

Your head pulsed. It felt like something was tearing, like old, brittle fabric; individual threads snapping one after the other. You tried to see it written down, pictured your mother saying it, your father, trying to sounds out the vague sounds of the syllables. Syllable? You couldn't even be sure.

“Easy.” Jass laid a hand over yours, clenched into a fist on the table. “Don't bite off more than you
can chew, hon.”

“I can’t—is there something wrong with me? Do I—is this a brain tumor thing, or--”

Jass sighed. “You don't have cancer. To my knowledge. You have been wounded, but you'll heal. The way to do that, however, is not to force it--”

You didn't

know

your

own--

“I said don't force it, Jesus--!”

And then suddenly Jass and the booth and the horrible, pockmarked diner were all gone, and you were nothing and nowhere and somehow there to see it all unfold.

You stared into the darkness, fully expecting the stars—and that was one of your axioms, wasn't it? If there was darkness, there was stars. It was hard to be scared of the dark when you knew how far the light could reach.

And then the darkness looked back, and you had the distinct sensation of having been noticed.

... You opened your eyes into darkness—flat, unremarkable, comforting darkness; the garden variety that happened every time the planet was in the way of the sun. You weren't sweating or breathing fast, but somehow, you felt as though you had woken up from a nightmare.

You clicked the light on. There was your room, exactly as you had left it. Most of your personal effects were in Nevada, but the light illuminated your old sky globe, the antique desk you hadn't wanted to risk in a cross-country move, a pile of books stacked inelegantly on the floor in the corner.

Everything was fine. Everything was alright.

You flicked the light off and rolled over, snuggling into the warmth of the blankets.

(Above you, the stars looked back.)

...

The next morning came bright and cold and very, very early. As it turned out, traveling hundreds of miles within a few hours gave you some weirdly acute jet lag. Your brain said four o'clock, but the alarm said, eight in the morning. Get up, lazy.

Oh, that was right, you remembered groggily. You got defensive when you were tired.

You grabbed some old clothes of yours from the storage bins you had left in your closet. Rifling through your old possessions made you feel younger; but also safer, somehow. It was hard to remember nightmares too vividly when you were wearing a sweater with little cartoon bunches of bananas on the front.

Breakfast consisted of re-heated leftovers, shoved together in a bowl for easy munching. You
shoveled a bite of stuffing and mashed potatoes as you opened the door to the garage, bumping the door farther open with you hip. “Mmph. Arcee? You still here?”

“That's charming.” Arcee was in root mode in front of the television. The space heater had been pulled into her lap like a stuffed animal, but she still looked positively miserable. “It's cold as frag, I hope you realize.”

“Yeah, sorry.” You sighed. “Welcome to New Hampshire, my friend. This is about as warm as it'll get until late March, and then it'll linger in the lower 30s forever.”

“Wonderful.” Arcee sighed, very pointedly. Her breath steamed the air. “Cybertronians don't do great in the cold, by the way.”

“This would have been good information to have before we headed out to Northern Maine? What the hell?”

She scoffed. “I'll warm up once we're on the road. Which would be quickly, preferably. You, on the other hand, are going to be in the wind for the next few hours.”

“I'll dress warm.” You had known the second you heard the words motorcycle and Maine in the same sentence that this trip was going to be hell. You could suck it up. “You want to hit the road?”

“Not so fast. You need to get ready. And I would like to sight-see.” Arcee gestured at the side door, which led to the yard out back.

“What sights? The trees? You will see a lot of trees today. i hate to be the one to break it to you, but that's kind of our thing.”

“Tempting, but I'd actually rather snoop into your personal life. Is that barn out back the one you used to stargaze from?”

“Yup. Knock yourself out.” You shrugged, apathetic. You didn't see the appeal yourself, but you supposed extra time with a roof over your head wasn't unwelcome.

“Excellent. C'mon.” Arcee clambered out the garage door like a child extricating themselves from a playhouse.

So much for that. You ducked back into the house for a coat and ran to catch up, pulling it over your shoulders as you went.

Chapter End Notes

Arcee: So tell me about your childhood.
Reader, standing in their own home, a picture of their loving parents and grandparents on the mantle: I was raised by wolves, actually
The smell of cold air and sawdust was nearly overpowering. The loft of the barn was an open, sturdy platform mainly accessible via the ladder and the hay window, a solid second shelf taking up the front half of the barn. You were pretty sure the former owners of the house had used this part of the barn for literal hay storage, or maybe making moonshine; but that was decades and decades before you were old enough to make it up here.

It was so strange to be back. Everything seemed smaller; even though you were more or less the same height as when you were here last. Logically, you knew it hadn't been that long; but in the space since you last climbed up here, you had started a new job, moved across the country, met dozens of new friends, gotten involved in an interplanetary war—well. Maybe you had grown after all.

Your dad had never been thrilled about you coming up here, but he had never explicitly stopped you. The loft had been your unofficial hideaway. This was where the majority of your astronomy lessons had taken place; where your first rickety, plastic telescope had been slowly replaced with bigger, better models until you had received the version that had followed you to Nevada. It wasn't exactly roomy—or private—but it had sort of become your unofficial hideaway. If you had ever had your own space before moving out, this was it.

Or rather, it had been. Now, it was just dusty and cold. Empty.

It was, frankly, depressing. A dull, unevolved sort of irritation was burning in your chest; probably because you had been miserable in some way or another for the last 72 hours, and there was only so much sadness your brain could take before it started fussing like a toddler. You very much wanted to go back into the house and stop thinking about this.

Arcee peered through the hay window. “This is nice.”

You grumbled uncharitably, batting a cobweb out of your face. “Ugh. I can't be the only one who cleaned up here, jeez.”

“Mm.” Arcee braced an arm over the hay window, leaning in. “Spent a lot of time in here, huh?”
“Yeah.”

“You draw those?”

You glanced at the constellations sloppily adorning the far wall. You hadn’t been the most artistic of kids, but you adored finger-painting. That had been a fun afternoon. “Yeah.” Your lips quirked without your permission. “I thought Grandma was gonna kill me, but she was actually kind of happy. I think the fact that they were actually fairly accurate sweetened the pot. She wouldn’t let me wash ‘em away, actually.”

“Absolutely adorable.” Arcee pushed away from the barn. “Okay, I’m satisfied. Let’s pack you some broth.”

You blinked. “What? It took me like three minutes just to get up here!”

“You.”

“I had to dig out the ladder and set it up and everything!”

“I’ll help you down.”

You begrudgingly accepted the lift. “That was probably the least invasive ‘snoop’ I’ve ever seen.”

“Would you rather I pried?” Arcee was shooting you a Look that would have made Ratchet proud.

You ignored it, and also her. “No. Never mind. Jesus.”

Arcee laughed at you, then sobered. “Listen. If I didn’t set you down in the middle of your childhood haunts and wait until you started reminiscing, you’d breeze right in and out of this place. You missed this house. Trust me, it’s important to come home every once in a while, even if ‘home’ is somewhere else now.”

Oh. Right. With a pang of belated realization, you remembered that Arcee’s entire home planet was currently both charred and broiled. Re-visiting her old childhood haunts wasn’t a luxury she had anymore.

You were being stupid—and not your usual brand of bland, well-meaning goof-em-ups; but a legitimate lapse in empathy. This wasn’t okay. You took a deep breath, actively willing your mood to improve. You pictured the layers of the sky above you, and then the wide, sheer sphere of space detritus beyond it, pulled along by the planet’s gravity.

When you opened your eyes again, the pit in your chest had dissolved a little. “Fine. Actually, you know what? Lift me back up there.”

You stepped back into the loft, scanning the space for physical evidence of the chaos that had once been an everyday occurrence. Your eyes fell on a series of shallow divots in one of the support beams. “My grandpa tried to teach me to throw a knife up here. It was part of a, you know, a larger knife safety lesson, but this was the part I really liked.”

“Mm.” Arcee settled back in, lazily interested. “Can you still throw knives?”

“Nah. Part of the lesson was that he pretended to slip and cut his thumb off. Fake blood, over-the-top screaming, the whole works. I don’t think I actually touched any knives.” You still weren’t sure what moral you were supposed to learn there, other than ‘be traumatized;’ but apparently that was the way his father had taught him to be careful with sharp objects.
Arcee looked a little put off. “That's...weird.”

“Yeah, probably. Except I used to watch old horror movies with aliens in them—don't interrupt, you can make fun later. But I knew what fake blood looked like, is the point. But my dad, who heard the yelling, didn't.”

“So...”

“So my dad climbed up, saw all the 'blood' everywhere, and started screaming. Grandpa—still holding the knife—got startled and accidentally nicked an artery.”

“Primus.” Arcee grinned unashamedly. “Good thing your mom had medical training?”

“She was actually in Germany at the time. But my Grandma was there.” you smiled wryly. “She isn't what you might call a soft touch, but she's good under pressure.”

“What about that broken window? That looks interesting and embarrassing.” Arcee settled against the side of the barn, self-satisfied.

You wound up giving her the two-cent tour. Arcee's interest, blended with a smug sort of satisfaction, was endearing, if a little annoying. The feeling that she was acting like she was humoring you was negated by the fact that you humoring her right back. Maybe that was why it was easy for the two of you to get along—you both had a dry sort of tolerance you could fall into, like an old sweater.

Once you showed her pretty much everything she could see without having to be a motorcycle in order to fit, you went back inside. Halfway through packing a warm meal, the kids called. You handed your phone over so Arcee could talk to Jack—which made for an adorable scene, watching her cradle your cell phone in her giant, sharpened fingertips—so you could focus on ladling chicken broth into a thermos. Your cargo pants had enough room for that and a sandwich, which was nice. You would need all the warmth you could get.

You set off in a kind of comfortable silence. By the time you were back in Portsmouth, the exposed skin on your face had been battered red by the wind; but you were bundled up well, and the warmth of Arcee's seat was comforting. You were still pretty much in your home territory, and so you were able to tell Arcee stories about some of the more southern towns you passed. One time you got snowed in at an outlet in Kittery and you had to look at shoes for hours, once you went canoeing on the Saco River. It was quiet. It was nice.

For the first time in a while, you felt truly, actively relaxed.

Northbound on the Maine Turnpike of Black Friday was not what you considered optimal driving conditions, but Arcee seemed to manage. Without the harrowing responsibility of driving, you were free to fall into a mild kind of trance, despite the speed and the cold. Something about the steady rumble of Arcee's engine was innately soothing; and before long, your eyelids began to droop.

“If you doze off and let go, I swear to Primus I will kill you,” Arcee snapped over the headset.

“Mmh.” You blinked, shaken awake. “Ugh. Sorry. Where are we?”

“You don't know?”

You blinked, trying to scrunch your face back into wakefulness. You were sweating, inside your coat. You must have been colder than you realized.
“That's it.” Arcee crossed into the right lane. “You need warm caffeine. Do you know any coffee shops around here?”

You squinted at the uniform line of trees next to the highway that had accompanied you from the moment you had left your house. “What town are we in?”

“Portland.”

“Portland or South Portland?”

“Portland Portland, Primus. Who named these towns?”

You snorted. “That'll do. Throw a brick, it'll land in someone's coffee cup. Get off the highway and keep driving towards downtown, I guess? We'll come up on one eventually.”

Arcee used the Maine Mall exit; which was actually in South Portland, and completely packed. This would have been a fatal mistake for any driver that wasn't a sentient vehicle, but you figured that whatever traffic problems Cybertron could cook up outpaced southern Maine's by a fair piece. It was fascinating to watch, actually. As long as you didn't wind up arrested, you were content to hang on to the handlebars and enjoy the ride.

You wound up stopping at a Dunkin Donuts a little while from the exit. You drank your coffee like it was medicine. You hadn't been overly fond of the taste to begin with, and being cajoled into it like a fussy toddler refusing to eat their broccoli didn't help. Still, the warmth was appreciated.

You clenched your fingers, waiting for the cold-hot feeling of cold nerve endings warming up to fade. Your phone was cradled in between your chin and your neck, with Arcee on the other end. “So. What'd Jack have to say?”

“You need to be focusing on warming up,” Arcee said.

“You know, I am an actual adult, with self preservation instincts,” you pointed out, perhaps a little bit more snappish than was warranted.

“Fair. He's fine. He and June are…” she hesitated. “On rocky ground. But he'll pull through.”

You took a long, slow sip to avoid looking too miserable in the middle of a Dunkin's. “That bad, huh?”

“He's fine,” Arceu said, a little more insistently. “Don't worry about it. Frag.”

You let it go for now. You were pretty sure the entire reason you were out here was because the Bots were all nervous about how you were dealing with that...whole business, and you didn't want to make trouble. “What happened with the crashed ship?”

“Nothing, yet. Remember how Bulkhead had been making noises about some of the walls when we were leaving?”

“Uh. Yes?” you asked, mildly terrified.

“Yeah. Apparently, he found some cracks in the foundations of one of the older walls. It's fixable, it's nothing major, but he and Ratchet and Optimus have been focusing on that.”

“Jesus. Where was it? The medbay?”

“The training room,” Arcee said carelessly, with perhaps an undertone of sheepishness. “Just took a
few hits too many, he thinks.”

“Oh, really.” Arcee was one of the worst offenders for disqualifying opponents via slamming them out of bounds and into the walls. Bulkhead was second behind her, since Bee and Optimus weren’t much in the way of slamming during sparring matches and Ratchet didn’t train much, so you supposed she wasn’t in too much trouble. “Well, better than learning about it when the wall comes down on someone, I guess.”

“Mm. Those things have a way of sneaking up on you.”

…

Portland was still a good few hours south of where you needed to be, so you insisted you hop back on the road pretty quick. The greater Portland-Scarborough area was about as far north as your family had usually ventured, excepting special occasions; but you knew enough to keep an eye on the exits. Arcee kept asking you questions, apparently actually concerned about you somehow dozing off and hitting the road behind her.

“I’m fine,” you insisted, again.

“Of course you are,” Arcee said. “And I’m under direct orders to keep you alive. What’s the next exit?”

You passed a sign for exit 109. She waited, expectant.

“Seriously?”

“Answer the question, sleeping beauty.”

“You can’t see with the helmet, but my eyes are rolling.” You promised. “We’re coming up on the Augusta exit.”

It occurred to you that you were passing exits at a much quicker rate than you were used to. Portland to Augusta wasn’t exactly a long haul, but it took some time.

A glance at the speedometer, which was very obviously fake, told you nothing. “How fast are we going, by the way?”

“Fast.”

“Yeah, but how fast?”

“Fast.” You passed a brightly colored sportscar like it was standing still.

“Please don’t get me arrested.” you said, cheerily. “Like, you’re the expert? I get that, and I don’t wanna tell you your business? Do not get me arrested.”

“Like the police could catch us.”

“Arsce. I can and will call Optimus.”

She laughed at you, slowing back down to about seventy or so.

…

Around the three hour mark, you frowned. “You know what?”
“What?” Arcee flicked a side mirror in your direction.

“I don't have a class M license. This is actually super illegal.”

After a moment of cosideration, Arcee slowed to exactly the speed limit. “Would it make you feel better if I said that as an undocumented alien, me being here at all is illegal on a technicality?”

“No, that's just depressing in a general, social sense. But I appreciate the effort.”

Chapter End Notes

Reader: you know, this has been surprisingly stress-free. Arcee, cold and tired of keeping them from dozing off and falling off at highways speeds: ...Yup.
Meteorites

Chapter Summary

A meteoroid is a small celestial body moving through the Solar System. A meteor is a meteoroid that entered a planet's atmosphere and burned up upon entry. A meteorite is a meteor that survived entry, crashing intact on the planet's surface.

Chapter Notes

Happy Solstice, folks! A little bit of a longer chapter this week, as we head towards the main event of this storyline.
As a note: This story reached the half-year mark last week! That is, as they say, absolutely bonkers. Especially considering that we've barely even touched the general outline. We've got a ways to go, folks.
I should probably mention this somewhere a little more permanent than the author's notes, but you can find me on tumblr at authorticity.tumblr.com.

Friday

It had always irked Rosa to keep folks waiting. If her jurisdiction had been a little less rural and a little more rambunctious, maybe, she would have gotten used to it eventually; but it wasn't, and she hadn't. Rosa was free to run her little slice of responsibility the way she wanted to, and that meant she was going to treat everyone else's time with the same regard she would expect from them. There was no letting them sweat when she was there, nope. She did her best to uphold old Sheriff Winthrop's policy of making time whenever time needed to be made. If someone needed to talk to her—as an officer of the law or otherwise—that was a priority. Perks of being a small town cop, perhaps.

The man in the rumpled suit had the general look of someone who decidedly did not have this privilege. He looked like the sort who had three things waiting on him for every one thing he managed to get done. It wasn’t particularly charitable of her, maybe, but Rosa wasn’t happy to see that look; because when someone with that many problems came through her door, it was probably because some of his problems would shortly become her problems.

“Thanks for seeing me on such short notice, Sheriff,” said Agent William Fowler of the Special Forces, according to his ID.

“Officer Rosa is fine, sir. We keep things pretty informal.” She gestured for him to take a seat. He did, slouching into the cushions like it was the first time he had sat down in days. “How can I help?”

Fowler sighed. “Have you ever heard of a terrorist organization called MECH?”

She had. There was a watch list that she was kept abreast of; and they were one of the more prominent names. “Have they been sighted near Jasper? We haven't heard anything.”
“Not precisely.” Agent Fowler cleared his throat. “I'm on special assignment on site a little ways outside of town. Unfortunately, the 'special' part of that assignment has made its way into Jasper proper. I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to share more, but there is a fair chance that MECH might attempt to gain a foothold in Jasper as a kind of stepping stone.”

“Okay.” She gave it some thought. Jasper's police department didn't have too many resources, but they'd make do. “What more can you tell me?”

Agent Fowler slid a comforting thick file across the desk. Rosa flipped through it quickly. MECH history, affiliations, suspected personnel... “What about your special assignment? Does that remain relevant?”

Fowler's face twitched. That was a yes, then. “I'm not at liberty to say.”

Rosa waited. When nothing more was forthcoming, she sighed. “Agent, you've just told me that the town I've taken an oath to protect with my life is under threat. Partially from MECH, along with… she spread her hands on the table. “Fill in the blank. A censor bar. This is the equivalent of sending a dire warning with empty lines instead of the nouns for me to fill in like a Mad Libs page.”

“I'm not authorized to make that sort of call, Sheriff,” Fowler said, woodenly. “Sorry.”

“Can you promise that this special assignment does not pose a threat to Jasper?”

He didn't say anything.

Rosa was very good at being calm. She exercised that talent now. “I understand that you came here in order to ask me to put a watch out for MECH. No sooner said than done. But you have to give me something. We're—I have two officers and a secretary, sir. I have the police department from The Andy Griffith Show. Is there anything more you can give me? Anything you can do?”

Agent Fowler frowned, but he said, “I'll do my best, Sheriff.”

Which wasn't much; but the reluctantly sympathetic look he shot her as he took her leave made her feel a bit better. The nice thing about people whose problems multiplied by orders of magnitude was that, sometimes, the reason they had so many was because they were trying to help everybody.

While that ball was rolling, Rosa pulled a weighty, well-worn address book out of the filing cabinet and dialed the first number.

Rosa Hernandez hadn't become Jasper's youngest sheriff by waiting around for other people to do her job for her.

...  

Saturday  

“It's not a big deal,” said Raf wearily.

There was a lot about Earth—and about humans—that Bumblebee was aware that he didn't fully understand. He didn't mind, most of the time—he understood that he didn't understand, at least, which is more than some could say. But one of the reasons that he was okay with it was because Raf was so good about taking the time to be patient and truthful and explain things to him, because if he didn't explain things, then Bumblebee couldn't help him, and--

“I know,” said Raf. “I know it's tough, but that isn't about that. You don't have to worry about this.”
Then what was it about?

“Nothing, Bee.”

Sure.

“Nothing.”

Inelegantly presented data.

Raf blinked, startled out of his stupor. “What?”

Bumblebee wasn't taking it back.

“No, I—I think I mistranslated something?”

It—well, Bumblebee wasn't the best at swearing, but it wasn't unintelligible. Primus.

“Oh. Did you mean, like…does it kind of mean horseshit?”

It—well, it was sort of—well. Bumblebee buzzed, embarrassed. It meant nonsense, but—but rude. It wasn't his fault some things didn't translate well.

Raf chuckled, weakly. “Is it kind of like saying—” Raf adorably mispronounced an insult indicating that the recipient had a poor grasp of medical knowledge.

Bumblebee beeped in delight. Oh Primus, that was so cute.

Raf was giggling, too. “I am not!”

He was! He was! Bumblebee saw it! Raf swore like a—a tiny little duckling, like a sneezing kitten—

“Now you're just saying cute things! That's not how it works!” Raf buried his face in his hands, laughing. Bumblebee was careful to keep his smugness to himself.

But—no. Raf was—Raf was crying, suddenly, big wheezing sobs that shook his tiny body.

Bumblebee scooped him up, fighting panic. He had thought—it—that wasn't how it worked, Raf had been happy a moment ago. Was this Bee's fault? Had he misread the situation that badly?

Raf leaned into Bee's palm, arms wrapped around his torso. “S—I'm sorry—” Raf was gasping for breath, now, face red.

Bumblebee brought Raf up to collarbone-level, humming softly, trying not to let his hands shake. It was going to be okay. Just—his processor stammered—breathe? Just—focus on that, in and out. Okay. Good. Okay. Okay.

“Stop—” Raf giggled deliriously, tears rolling down his face. “Stop saying 'okay'.”

While Bee was frantically trying to think of an alternative positive glyph, Raf took one great, long sigh and breathed out in little bursts. His breathing slowly stabilized, slower and slower, as though something had popped back into place.

Bumblebee sat there for a long while, holding Raf and quietly stewing.

“It's okay,” Raf mumbled, eventually. “It's not your fault. I'm okay.”
Bumblebee didn't really trust his own perceptions of—well, all things human in general, but especially Raf's mood. As soon as Raf was looking better, they were going straight to Ratchet.

“No,” Raf tried to sit up straighter, and wound up rolling onto his side on Bumblebee's palm. “You did good. I just need to rest.”

Did this sort of thing happen a lot?

Raf sighed, quietly exhausted. “Um. Sometimes, these days. It never used to. It just feels like—” Raf looked up at Bee, quietly pleading for comprehension. “It feels like something bad's gonna happen, but—but later. Like it's coming, but not close enough to do anything. I just—I can't stop thinking about it, like—if I see certain people? And they do certain things, or say stuff? I don't know how to explain it.”

Wordlessly, Bee ran a fingertip along Raf's spine, trying to soothe him.

Raf uncurled a little. “Promise that you'll be okay?”

(This was the promise Miko had pressed Wheeljack for. This was the promise that Wheeljack—the swashbuckler, the daredevil, the smooth-talker—had refused to give her out of respect. Because this was a war, and they were all soldiers, and, statistically speaking, a promise like that was an out and out lie.)

(Bumblebee was a lot weaker than Wheeljack.)

He promised.

Raf sighed. “Yeah. I feel—well, I guess I feel a little better. I just…”

Bee waited.

“It just feels,” Raf said, slowly. “Like something is gonna happen soon.”

Sunday

“Happy birthday!”

Optimus blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

He looked the very long way down at Miko, grinning at him as she (wheelied? Heelied?) heelied down the hall in the opposite reaction.

Miko stopped herself with a spin, landing on her toes with a neat flourish. “Yeah! Like—you guys don't celebrate individual birthdays on Cybertron, right?”

“That is correct.” The separate construction of the spark and the frame made calculating a single date of activation a messy, complex business; denying the ancient Cybertronians the opportunity to develop the customs that had evolved into the contemporary birthday celebration as Optimus understood it.

“Yeah. But you're all about individualism, right? Autonomy and freedom and stuff. So having a day set aside to celebrate an entire person is totally up you guys' alley!” Miko threw some brightly colored paper in the air. It didn't seem to flutter as high as she likely meant it to, but it was nonetheless notably festive.
“I see.” Optimus mulled over the best way to respond to this. “And today is mine?”

“No, you can choose. Today's kind of the group's birthday. The birthdays' birthday! I'm gonna have everyone pick one.” She pulled a pocket-sized calendar out of her pocket. “Any ideas?”

“I would rather have time to think it over.” A great deal of time, preferably, to ensure that there was no hidden facet of this that could jeopardize his standing among the human officials he was forced to deal with. Fowler's opinion would be as benign as it was easily anticipated, at least; although in fairness, General Bryce's thoughts on the matter were…equally predictable.

She shrugged, unconcerned. “Yeah, no worries. I still haven't figured out, like, energon cake? Or something? So you've got tons of time. I'm gonna Skype Wheeljack.” Miko shoved the planner back in her packet and resumed rolling down the hallway.

“A moment, Miko.” Optimus knelt to place a hand in her path. “Bulkhead is still at work in this area. You may confer with him once the harmful contaminants disturbed by his repairs have been cleaned away.”

The scowl she shot him told Optimus that the child had indeed known she was trespassing, and furthermore, that she had no intentions of obeying him. An idea occurred to him. “In the meanwhile, perhaps you might ask Ratchet if he has picked out a…birth date.”

Miko brightened, but paused. Her lips quirked mischievously. “Gonna throw him under the bus, huh? Wow, dude. Wow.”

“A tactical decision.” Optimus waited until Miko had rounded the corner on the medbay before allowing himself a quiet, fond smile.

Only for a moment, however. He had an excavation project to plan.

…

Monday

Clarence had been in Jasper for a very long time.

In all that time, though, he had never been bored. He had been born at the very end of the mining era; and he had watched people come and go ever since, every one of them more interesting and exciting than the last. He wasn't like Jass, to poke and pry and discover the hidden things; he could simply accept that Jasper was what it was, whatever that might be at the moment.

It had become his practice to go into town about once in a while; a kind of a bi-monthly let's just make sure they're all still breathing trip. It was really an excuse to indulge in a storebought bouquet from the supermarket and perhaps a burger on the way out.

It was also an excuse to catch up with Jass, Clarence's eldest and greatest friend. Which was what brought him here.

He knocked, very politely. It took a few moments, but after a while, soft footsteps padded down the hall beyond. Clarence stood back, readying his most comforting smile.

June Darby stuck her head out, looking equal parts tired and wary and hopeful before her eyes lit on him. “Uncle Clarence?”

“June, dear.” He smiled past the pang in his throat. “You look so tired.”
She laughed, opening the door further. “I'm fine, Clarence. Just a little busy. I'm about to head out from work, but you can come in and wait for Jack if you want.”

He stepped into the house. It was clean; but that didn't mean anything. Some of the most sterile houses he had ever been in were also the unhappiest. “Oh no, thank you. Why don't I tag along? I'll drive, and you just put your head back and rest.”

“Do...” June stopped, mouth twitching. “Exactly how are you planning to get back here before the end of my shift?”

“Oh, I won't steal your car, don't you worry. I'll manage.” Clarence let June lead the way to the garage. “I see Jack must have taken his bike to school?”

“What?” June blinked. “Oh. No, it's in—well, he said it was in storage. Whatever that means.” She shook her head. “It—it doesn't really matter. He's grounded, anyway.”

“Ah.” Her entire posture had shifted when she said that. “Well, why don't we get started down the road, and you go and tell me all about it.”

June got into the car, somewhat begrudgingly. “There's not much to tell, honestly. We're just...having some trouble.”

“Mm.” Clarence searched around for the clutch. “Oh, this is a new one. I've still got the old '68, you know. These newer models are so handy.”

Out of the corner of his eye, June was smiling into her hand. Progress. “Now. If it's not the son, it's the father. How's the old bastard doing, anyhow?”

“No! Goodness, no. I haven't heard from Chris in years.” June sighed, starting the car and pulling out of the driveway. “I...Jack and I are having some difficulty with a mutual friend, that's all.”

Clarence waited, eyes on the road.

June sighed explosively. “There isn't really enough to tell, Clarence, honestly. It's just...”

She outlined the situation. The neighbor—who Clarence thought he might have met very briefly, maybe, back in August—sounded kind and mousy and exactly the sort of strange little person who tended to flourish in Jasper. It made the fact that all this trouble had come up in the first place all the more troubling.

When June was done, Clarence mulled it over for a moment. “Well. As much as I'd like to talk about these strange old portfolio people, I really have to ask first. Why are you so scared? What's the bald-faced reason, plain and simple?”

June laughed helplessly. “I—my kid's in trouble, Clarence. He might mixed up in—drugs, or gangs, or—and he won't tell me! Neither of them will!”

Well, he could help with that much. “To begin with, my dear, I can tell you that there haven't been any gangs in Jasper since the nineties. It's isolated, but the people talk a little too much for anything permanently covert to last very long. And Jack's not mixed up in drugs.”

“How can you be sure?”

He laughed. “Because I am, technically speaking. Poker night might have gone straight-edge, but the same ol' fellows show up every month.”
June's eyes stayed on the road. “Do you…”

“Know what's up? Very rarely.” He flipped down the sun visor, as the car drove out of the shadow of a mesa off in the distance and into the sunlight. “Although I could ask around, if you like. But I really do doubt I'd find anything in the less conventional circles I run in, you know. Jack's very like you were, as a child.”

June smiled dryly. “Depressingly boring?”

“Depressingly timid, dear.” I remember—you used to play with eggs for dolls. Do you remember that?”

She snorted. “Yes. Unfortunately.”

“No! Goodness, it was genius. If one broke, you would have a little ceremony in its honor. It was the loveliest thing.”

She smiled.

“Now, on the subject of these emailing snake fellows. Have you spoken to Rosa about all this?”

June didn't say anything.

Clarence sighed. “June.”

“They're the only ones around here that seem to be telling me the truth, Clarence.” Her hands gripped the wheel tighter. “Of course I don't trust them, but—they're the only chance I have of figuring this out.”

“You don't trust them, but they're the ones with the truth. The truth or a truth?”

Clarence glanced over in time to see June cover her mouth with a hand. “It's my son. I—there has to be something I can do.”

“What there?”

“What are you talking about?”

Clarence sighed. “June, I trust you to do what you need to, here. I have seen—” he stopped himself. “Well. You are not the first parent I've seen fear for their child. Fear is dangerous; but you are stronger. Be sad, be angry, whatever it is you are; but realize that this is a situation someone has imposed upon you, my dear. Be aware of that. Be careful.”

He took one hand off of the steering wheel and put on top of June's. “This will be difficult to hear; but I very much doubt that Jack is in any danger he brought upon himself. It seems all too likely that he is in danger because people are attempting to put him there.”

…

Monday, 3AM EST

Something hard and blunt stabbed you in the stomach. You wheezed, startled awake.

Arcee was standing over you, looking grim. “Up. We're bridging out in ten.”

It took you a minute to catch your breath. “Arcee, the fuck—? What's the time?”
Your guest bed was in the Griffin Rock firehouse basement. This was mostly so that you wouldn't have to brave the local inn—which was, like the rest of Griffin Rock, was as futuristic as it was fucking crazy—and partially because the Burns family was just plain good people. Calling your stay with them relaxing would have been a major misnomer, but it was—ininvigorating, maybe. This trip had been calming in ways you hadn't even known you had needed. You owed Chief Burns and his family a serious debt.

That being said, this would be the third out of five mornings that you had been woken up on account of some disaster you could help out with in some way or another. No wonder your grandmother had hated this place.

“We're leaving. Go make your goodbyes to the Chief, hurry up.” Arcee flipped her way back into a motorcycle. “That 'ten minutes' is now nine, for the record.” “What is it?” Belatedly, you scrambled out of bed, lunging for the clean shirt you had laid out the night before.

“We're being called home,” Arcee said grimly. “Optimus is sick.”

Chapter End Notes

Canon: *crashes through the wall like the Kool-Aid Man*
The medbay was not, on the scale of titans, a large room. Fit the entire roster of Outpost Omega in its walls, and it got even smaller.

Everyone was there, including Jack and Wheeljack—which in other circumstances might have been fun and cozy. The Bots—all of them, excluding the patient—were all more or less clustered in a loose semi-circle around the temporary cot Ratchet had pulled from somewhere. Even Agent Fowler, who you hadn’t seen in person for at least a month, was whisper-shouting into his cell phone in the corner, casting fretful, grouchy looks over his shoulder every few minutes.

Nobody was talking much. Miko and Raf were sitting on their guardians’ shoulders, occasionally sitting up to murmur something in their ears or get a better look at the cot. Jack was leaning against Arcee’s shin. Despite the fact that neither of them were directly acknowledging each other, it was easy to tell that they were glad to see each other again. It had been...a while.

You were sitting on the edge of the console, keeping an eye on everyone. This sort of situation had never been your strongest suit, but the least you could do was keep an eye on the proceedings.

You had a feeling Optimus would appreciate that much, at least.

He looked...rough wasn’t quite the right word. Fragile. Frail. Artificial, maybe, like whatever it was that told your brain this is a person had finally wised up to the fact that the Autobots were robots. You had gotten used to them over the course of the last few months; started ignoring the strange, jerky movements and the constant focus and unfocus of their eyes in favor of animated voices and vibrant personalities. They were obviously alive; and your brain had decided that was enough to call them human.

(If their aliveness was what made them seem human, was it the fact that Optimus was inching closer to death what made him seem alien again?)

You turned back to glance at the console. Ratchet had been standing there since before you and Arcee had arrived, and hadn’t so much as glanced around since. On one side of the page, you could
see what looked like a set of vitals marked in Cybertronian, including a sine curve-looking thing he kept flicking his eyes at worriedly. On the screen immediately next to you, he seemed to be programming something in the IDE you had seen him use for the more delicate coding you had implemented back in October.

On Ratchet’s far side, Wheeljack didn’t seem to be doing much of anything. He was just staring at the vitals screen, occasionally marking something down in a datapad.


He buzzed like a ceiling fan, nearly imperceptibly, tilting his head to the side so that he could see Raf on his shoulder. Bulkhead shifted next to him, listening in.

“No,” Raf insisted, a little louder. “Can’t you hear that? It sounds like...Ratchet? Ratchet!”

His voice rose in a panicked shout, apparently apropos of nothing. Ratchet turned, an impatient snarl already half formed on his face—

Beep beep beep beep—!

“Slag,” Wheeljack breathed, and lunged for the console. You had to steady yourself as he jostled it, hands blurring across the keyboard.

Ratchet was at Optimus’ bedside in seconds, any exhaustion or annoyance cast aside in favor of sheer, brutal efficiency. He pulled a thin canister of energon and an IV line from the nearest shelf and flicked a short, thick blade out of his own wrist. Without any warning, he pried the arm off Optimus’ arm and sank the needle in with the speed of someone who has done the same exact thing in the exact same manner thousands of times.

The canister began to visibly empty.

“Arcee, run and get a full cube from storage,” Ratchet said, calmly. “Be fast.”

She was gone in a flash. In her wake, the rest of you were left waiting, eyes trained on the canister in Ratchet’s hand. The silence was stifling.

“Uh,” Bulkhead said. “Would a direct infusion—”


Someone whined, high and anxious. It could have been either Bee or Raf, you weren’t sure.

Arcee nearly skidded past the door. “Got it.”

Ratchet grabbed it from her and exchanged the line moments before the canister ran out. The level in the new container dropped dramatically for another few moments, and stopped.

“Stable,” reported Wheeljack with a groan. “Primus wept. You want I should run a diagnosis?”

Ratchet collapsed in on himself a little, the bothered fear and frustration returning to the edges of his expression. “No. No, but check the fuel usage history on his immune system. We can’t completely predict how much the Matrix is helping or hurting him here.”

Raf had his face buried in his hands. Bumblebee buzzed helplessly, glancing around for help.

“Why don’t we go get some extra energon?” Bulkhead suggested, nudging him gently. “Squishies
too. You want to help teach the guys how to use the little trolley, Miko?”

Miko started to answer him, frowning ferociously, and stopped and took another look at Raf. Her face settled, and she nodded. “Yeah, sure. Dude, c’mon, you’re like the only one here who has his permit.”

Jack shuffled off, casting a look at you. You nodded, hoping it looked reassuring.

When they were gone, Ratchet turned back to the computer. “I’m going to need your help explaining this to them.”

It took you a moment and a confused glance at Arcee to realize he was talking to you. “Yeah. I mean, whatever I can do, honestly. Sitting on my hands is starting to get to me.”

Arcee nodded, looking commiserating. “Cybonic Plague. The first truly engineered virus in recent Cybertronian history.”

Ratchet clacked on the keyboard a little harder than was strictly necessary. “There’ve been others. Not quite as nasty, but they’re out there. Have we ever discussed Decepticon philosophy with you?”

“I—no?” This seemed like the polar opposite of a good time for it, but you let that pass. “What about it?”

Arcee laced her thin, sharp fingers together, looking pensive. “It was born out of Cybertron’s gladiatorial underworld. Same as me, actually. Everything was about not only strength, but self-possession. The ability to demonstrate power, whether or not you actually had it. To put on a show.”

She took a deep breath, glancing at Ratchet. He nodded. “Ask the average Decepticon off the streets what the scariest thing is, and they’ll say weakness. But that’s not actually right—well, not entirely. But the really scary thing is knowing that you’re weak. The awareness that there is literally nothing you can do to save yourself is…” Her eyes snapped back from the middle distance, focusing on you. “In a lot of cases, it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. Whether or not the average grunt has the awareness to know this is another matter entirely, but the person who designed this disease certainly did.

“Again, this is an engineered virus,” Ratchet cut in flatly. “It kills people in exactly the way the Decepticons want to it to kill people.”

You let that sink in for a beat. “Word of advice? Don’t give that spiel to the kids. That shit’s gonna give me nightmares.”

“Mm.” Ratchet looked unimpressed. “On the bright side, we know exactly what—and roughly when—each symptom will emerge. Certain variables aside.”

You glanced at the container of energon with the IV line sticking out of it. Apparently. “Is this like a computer virus, or…?”

Ratchet shot you a bleakly incredulous glance.

“Right. Sorry.” You drummed your fingers. Computer viruses were called viruses because they spread; but they weren’t actually cells. They could only replicate themselves with the help of a host program. Download the file, download the virus. “So it’s spreading...cognitively? Like, as his processor runs contaminated file?”

“Not exactly. Cybertronian bodies rely on files shared across systems. Once the virus recognizes a file headed towards a system that matches the criteria, it jumps aboard.” His mouth twisted. “This is a
Your stomach did a slow roll. Could Optimus hear you right now? Was he trapped under his own skin, unable to even open his eyes? “How long--”

Ratchet closed his eyes for a long moment, and turned back to his work.

“Hours,” Arcee said for him. “If that.”

Abruptly, the nausea coalesced into sharp, familiar anger. It was almost a relief, compared to the helplessness that had seeped under your skin. This wasn’t fair, right, allowed. Optimus would dying today if and only if they got through you first.

“Oh, Okay.” You ran your fingers over your head, buzzing with the urge to kick something. “What’s our next move? What are our options?”

Ratchet turned back to the console. “Well, to begin with, we’re doing a sweep for any sign of the Decepticon warship. Rafael and Jack have both been instrumental in narrowing it down, but we can’t be sure they’re even on the planet still. it’s been so quiet...”

“They’re here,” Arcee folded her arms. “Or at least, Optimus seemed to think so.”

“Do you think the Decepticons have a cure?”

“I think they have an inoculation,” Ratchet said. “Which is just as good, for the next few hours.”

“There’s plenty of reports of this slag killing us,” Wheeljack said from the doorway. “But none of them accidentally killing themselves with it. Which is unusual, for a crowd-control weapon.”

Arcee nodded. “Tons of them were exposed, but if any of them actually showed symptoms, Prowl didn’t know about it.”

Ratchet drummed his fingers. “That would halt the damage. I can repair most of what’s already contaminated. The prolonged mental awareness is designed into the virus. It’s designed to ignore most psychological systems until the end. If we can administer the preventative measure before the final stages, he’ll be fine.”

“So we go and get it,” Arcee said determinedly. “On site infiltration. If they have it on file, we can bridge directly into the medbay and be back in ten minutes. Bee and I are literally trained to do this exact thing.”

“I can shake up a distraction,” Wheeljack offered. “Take Bulkhead, maybe get the kids out of your way. Make a day of it.”

“You’re not taking the kids anywhere,” Ratchet snapped, almost absentmindedly. “I need Raf on hand, and Miko accounted for.” He paused. “Actually, take Miko. I don’t trust her near the ground bridge.”

He shrugged and ducked back around the corner. You frowned. “Where do you need me?”

Ratchet met your eyes, somberly. He looked tired. He always looked tired, but for a moment, he looked ready to collapse. “Someone needs to keep vigil, if I’m going to be organizing everything. I’ll show you how to read the chart. In the meanwhile, we need to figure out where that blasted ship is.”
“We know where it’s not,” Raf said from the doorway. “Which is kind of just as good.” He ducked in, Jack at his shoulder like a bodyguard. There was no sign of Miko and Bulkhead. Bee hovered in the corner, looking uncharacteristically grim.

His eyes were suspiciously red, but his voice was steady. “We can’t pick them up on radar or lidar, right? But neither can anyone else. But they’re still a big, solid mass in the sky. They have to avoid places where there’s other artificial stuff in the sky. Even if they bother dealing with short-range scans, they need to, you know. Not be run into by a commercial airliner.”

“No fly zones?” You ventured.

Arcee shook her head. “No-fly zones are pretty closely monitored. People like to be the first to know if the other side’s put a toe out of line. Even without the long-range sensors, people would notice.”

“Wait a second.” You dug out your phone and tapped the speed-dial button.

There was a pause, as it rang. Everyone was staring at you.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dad. Remember how you used to be a pilot?”

There was a short pause. “Kiddo, it’s four in the morning.”

“It’s important, I promise.”

He sighed, after a pregnant pause. “Yeah, I remember. What about it?”

“Where are there, like...” you scrunched your face, trying to word it eloquently. “Not planes. Are there any places that planes avoid, outside of designated no-fly zones?”

Your father was a man who had been steady best friends with your mother for over thirty years. If he wasn’t used to apparently urgent questions at inopportune times, he wouldn’t have lasted a month.

“Gee. Well, plane routes as a rule are designed for minimizing the amount of distance. That’s why they look curved on a map—going from New York to London via Greenland is actually faster than trying to shoot a straight line across the Atlantic. Does that makes sense?”

“So far, so good.” Ratchet had a map of airline routes up, nodding along. “Any place in particular?”

“The Poles, mostly. Sort of the—the South Pacific area comes to mind, although there are exceptions. Does that help any?” Your dad said, patiently.

“Tons and tons.” You sighed, an irrational wave of relief overtaking you. For the first time since Arcee had woken you up, you felt like your feet were firmly on the ground. “Love you.”

“You too, bud. Sleep tight.”

You shoved your phone in your pocket. “Well, that’s several thousands miles instead of many millions.”

“Thought your dad was a truck driver,” Arcee pointed out, a little accusatorily. “Is this a different dad, somehow?”

“He can do more than one thing. Is this really the time?” You gestured at the occupied cot.

“Fair. I’ll get the boys together.” Arcee sped off, pausing only to scoop up Raf.
Ratchet tuned to you. “Well. Let’s get you set up.”

…

Click.

“Hey. Hello. It’s—well, it’s me. You know who I am.

“I’m recording this because I don’t particularly want to sit in a silent room by myself for the rest of the night waiting for the others to get back. And it feels—well, I think it’s a little creepy, the thought of someone talking to you while you can’t hear them. Or talking about you. I don’t—guess it would just bother me, especially if I were super sick. So I’m just…going to talk to this camera for the rest of the night—this also feels weird! This feels very, very weird, honestly. I’ve really got a no-win scenario on my hands, huh.

“You don’t have to watch this if you don’t want.”

Silence.

“So…the others just left. Wheeljack and Bulkhead and Miko have been gone for—a while, I guess. I actually don’t know how to see the clock while my phone’s recording. But Arcee and Bee are just—just out the door. So to speak.

“I’m doing a really bad job of this.”

“I think you’d really—you’re really going to be proud of them when you see how well they’re working together. Miko’s playing nice with Wheeljack, Ratchet hasn’t yelled at anyone…That second one is a little spooky. I’m assuming that once you’re okay, he’s just going to spend the next few weeks being absolutely miserable to everyone to balance it out. He’s good like that.

“That—you know, out loud that feels mean. Especially if I wind up…actually giving this to you? Which, the way I’m going, is a little bit in question, since the idea of someone actually having access to my 3 AM rambles is actively horrifying. I’ll probably just delete this.

“But—now that I think about it, actually, you’ve seen my 3AM craziness before. You laughed at a weird thing I said once. And the first or second conversation we had wound up with you driving me home at o’-dark-thirty. That was decent of you, by the way. With any luck, you’ll think this is funny too.

“God, I don’t remember a single thing I said to you that night. That’s—that’s for the best, really. Less for me to agonize over.

“…Unsurprisingly, my brain is agonizing over it anyway. That’s fun.

“…I hope you know how much the others miss you like this. I mean, me too, but the Bots…your people really care about you. I don’t mean to—I’m probably overstepping, but. You know. You should know.”

A slightly longer pause. The shrill, tinny whine of the phone’s microphone stretches on.

“Do you know sign language? Like, ASL? I’m…thinking of learning, I guess. I feel like I’m gonna need it, somehow. And anyway—it’s a stupid thing not to know, right? Like, another language that I don’t hear spoken a lot is one thing, but there are tons of folks who use it wherever you go. Deaf folks, mute people…babies, I guess? I think some people teach ASL to their kids.
“I know a couple signs already, technically. This is sorry. This means ‘I love you’. I think. Your pinky finger is the ‘I’, your index and thumb is the ‘L’, and your index and pinkie fingers are the ‘U’. I think. I don’t actually know how I know that.

“I’m just rambling. I’m sorry. I’m assuming you’ve stopped watching.

“...I had a nice time in Maine. Thank you for that. The police chief put me up in his basement—I think he’d be a good fit for what you were thinking. He and his family. Good people.

“My grandma’s doing fine. Her surgery got postponed a week, but she’s cool with it. The fact that she’s getting in within a week of referral is ridiculous anyway. In the meantime, they’re kind of just...hanging out in Pennsylvania.

“They visited a pizza museum. Which sounded like fun, although I’m not entirely sure how much of a pizza history there is to have a museum about.

“That’s uncharitable of me. I’m sure pizza has a rich and colorful history. I’ll look it up later, maybe. Later.”

A shorter, more embarrassed pause. They looked up at the vitals chart again, as though seeking comfort.

“Rest up, Optimus. You’re gonna be okay. It’s...it’s all going to be okay.”

Click.

Chapter End Notes

Reader’s grandmother, staring at an exhibit of pizza cutters: This is nice and distracting. Really gets my mind off things, yep. Grandpa: This was your idea.
Dwarf Planets

Chapter Summary

As astronomical cartography progressed and countless smaller solar satellites were discovered, the catchall phrase 'planet' grew less and less practical for describing celestial bodies below a certain size. Rather than trying to classify literally hundreds of objects in our Solar System alone as planets, the classification 'dwarf planet' was introduced to supplement. While there are eight planets in the interior of the Solar System, beyond them lies hundreds of dwarf planets in the band of space referred to as the Kuiper Belt. These include natural satellites such as Charon, Eris, and Pluto.

Chapter Notes

Please enjoy yet another early chapter, courtesy of the fact that tomorrow will be spent in fence-building hell. Thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a long night.

Ratchet was in and out occasionally, but he could be productive and worried at the command console and only worried in the medbay, so he stuck to the former. In his absence, you passed the time by staring blankly at the vitals chart, mind adrift, only to snap back to attention the moment one of the symbols changed. You texted Ratchet updates, rather than yelling. Loudness felt wrong.

The entire base was eerily quiet.

(Again with the silence. You were buying the Bots a white noise machine or something, Jesus.)

The stupid video you had recorded hovered in the queue for the Optimus-only text conversation on your phone. The last few messages between the two of you had been an updated list of requirements to check Griffin Rock for from him, and a casual you got it from you. It felt like a clumsy way to say goodbye to someone, if that was really going to be the last conversation you ever had with him.

You sent the video, before you could lose your nerve. You had no idea if he had access to communications systems, or if they had been infected yet or not, but if you didn’t send it now you were only going to realize how much of an awkward idiot you were and delete it. If nothing else, it made you feel better.

(It didn’t. There would be no goodbyes tonight, not if you could help it. Even considering the possibility made you feel stubborn.)

You stared at the screen some more. The numbers didn’t change. Ordinarily, you would have pulled out a book to read, or maybe checked your email. The idea of looking away from the screen for an extended period of time made your heart ache with anxiety.
A shoe scuffed loudly. You looked up to see Agent Fowler was in the doorway, halfway through
stuffing his phone back into his pocket. He looked about as wrung out as you felt, which was a
considerable amount. You had the vague recollection of trying to pay for his coffee at the diner once.
If you had thought he looked rough then, this was grounds for an ambulance call. “How’s the big
guy?” he called.

You motioned him over with a wave, switching your attention back to the display as soon as
possible. “He’s deteriorating. Not as quickly as Ratchet thought he was going to, but it’s still not
great news. Any word from the away team?”

He climbed up to sit next to you, moving stiffly to ensure he didn’t mess up the tailoring in his suit. “I
wouldn’t know. I just got done smoothing things over with a few of the more excitable types at the
Pentagon. Something about the words ‘extraterrestrial bioweapon’ made the higher-ups nervous, I
guess.”

You groaned softly. Yet another thing to worry about.

Fowler took in your expression. “I wouldn’t worry too much. Although if you have any idea which
fine individual decided to preemptively alert the Jasper’s sheriff that there might be a medical
emergency in the area, I’d appreciate the tip.”

You blinked, processing this. Your eyes felt dry. “Jasper has a sheriff?”

“Yeah. Rosa Hernandez? Built like a bowling alley stood on its side.” Fowler lifted a flattened hand
above his head in the universal sign for ‘really fucking tall’.

“Oh—yeah, I know her. How about that.” It probably shouldn’t have surprised you that no one had
mentioned it. Jasper’s population had a bad case of egocentricism sometimes—if it was common
knowledge here, it was common knowledge everywhere.

“Yeah.” Fowler crossed his arms. “Nice lady. Making my life a real pain in the ass, but nice as hell. I
got one of my superiors to talk her down by saying it was a false alarm, but we’re still trying to track
down the caller.”

“Yeah. Jeez.” It occurred to you that you probably had a higher clearance level Rosa. Higher than
most of the people you knew, actually. The thought wasn’t entirely reassuring. “I don’t think I’ve
ever heard you swear before.”

He shrugged, eyes on the gurney. “It’s typically bad for diplomatic relations to swear in front of the
foreign envoys. At the same time, though...” He gestured, arms sweeping to encompass the room. “I
had this for a job. You try putting up with this circus without cussing the nearest you can get to a blue
streak.”

“You don’t like your job?” you asked. One readout on the vitals chart had ticked down a unit. You
pulled out your phone. “Keep talking, I just need to let Ratchet know something.”

He smiled, and the darker bags under his eyes creased. “Wouldn’t exchange it for the world.
Excepting nights like this, of course.”

You nodded. There was a reason you barely ever got to see Fowler, and it wasn’t because he didn’t
like you. Dealing with emergencies was his day to day.

“Besides,” he added, after a bit. “I don’t like swearing in front of Prime. Reminds me of my high
school principal.”
“I can kind of see that.” Optimus had the general demeanor of someone with authority in a scholastic setting. “The other day, Arcee and I were saying he was like Commander Pentecost.”

“What, like from Pacific Rim?” You nodded. He wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, sure. He died at the end, right? That’s pretty fitting.”

You very carefully didn’t look at the figure on the cot. “That’s not funny, Agent.”

“What—ah, hell. Not like that.” He grumbled, frustrated. “Look, part of my job is keeping tabs on the Autobots’ mental states. Don’t look at me like that, it’s on the level. Ratchet gets a copy, although I’m pretty sure everything in there’s stuff he already knows. But every month, a person in a nicer suit than mine asks me if the bots are gonna go Independence Day on us, and every month I tell them ‘sir no sir, they will not.’” He met your eyes. “They’ve got some issues, though, all of ‘em. I’m not at liberty to get into most of them, but they’re all mostly pretty obvious. Except for him.” He jerked his head at the cot. “Based on the psych analytics we get from the lab based on his mission reports, there’s a strong case for labeling him suicidal. That man plans like he’s the one and only acceptable casualty in the whole war.”

“Agent Fowler,” you said, quietly. “I don’t think you should be telling me this.”

“Fair enough.” He stood up. “Ratchet does it, and I do it where I can, but keep an eye on the guy, alright? He needs it.”

That was really what you were doing right this moment, but you nodded anyway. “Get some rest. You look like the opposite of caffeine.”

He left with a wave, leaving you alone with the steady, gentle downturn of the vitals chart.

…

some time later, you blinked bearly away from the chart and yawned. “Hey, boss.”

Ratchet looked positively haggard as he stepped into the room. You weren’t sure if it was because you were aware of it or because he was just tired, but his movements seemed quicker, less predictable. He wasn’t moving like a human.

He checked on Optimus seemingly on automatic, standing over him with a (rehearsed, programmed, genuine) slump to his shoulders. “We have good news,” he said, no looking at you, “And bad news.”

Your heart rate spiked. The medbay had fallen back into silence; and as much as you hated it, it had lulled you into an uneasy kind of daze. You were wide awake now, though. “I…Okay. Bad news first, please.”

He laid an efficiently gentle hand against Optimus’ forehead, frowning when his patient didn’t respond. He moved to the vital chart, bringing up a slightly different display. “Well, the Decepticons don’t seem to keep the inoculation in their medical database. Arcee found a medical note in the file instructing any doctor who needed it had to contact Megatron directly for a copy.”

“Megatron?”

“Their warlord supreme.” Ratchet finally looked up. His face was full of grief, or rage. It was difficult to tell which. “The original creator of Cybonic Plague.”

“Oh.” You remembered the jagged, hulking figure from that cool August evening forever ago. If
Optimus had seemed imposing, something about the fevered, unnatural intensity of his opponent’s strikes had scared you even more. You hated your brain for even thinking about it, but he had moved like something out of a horror film. “He’s dead, though. Would his successor have a copy? Any of his officers?”

Ratchet blinked, and cleared his throat. “Well, that brings me to the good news. Or the worse news, arguably. Megatron lives.”

You stared at him. For a second, the terrifying implications washed over you; before some other, more immediately pragmatic part of your psyche gathered them up, stomped on them, and locked the fear and the panic behind a door made out of a combination of rationality, exhaustion and sheer, unwavering obstinance.

Once your terror-induced headache had lessened, you latched onto the upside. “So then there’s still a chance we can save him.”

Ratchet nodded soberly. “It will be dangerous, but it can be done.” he paused. “Theoretically, anyway. If you like, team B is back. Bulkhead can take your place.”

You shook your head. “I am objectively the least useful person in the building. You need all hands on deck. Can you run a feed to my phone or something, though? Something to keep me updated in real time?”

Ratchet pulled something small off the top shelf and handed it delicately to you. It was a bluetooth speaker. “If it’s not charged, grab one of the extension cords from the bottom shelf.”

“I remember.” You turned it on. “what’s the—the chart just changed—what’s the plan?”

Ratchet turned to look to scan the chart again. “We’re utilizing...one of the war’s more intuitive interrogation techniques. The cortical psychic patch.”

“That means nothing to me.” And you honestly couldn’t wait to hear all about this new depressing and scary alien thing.

He sighed. “I’m not explaining the entire field of mnemosurgery tonight, Primus. Have—you know a USB cord?”

“Yeah?”

“One of those, but for people.”

“...Yeah.” Your stomach rolled unpleasantly. That wasn’t as terrible as you had anticipated. If you thought about it too hard—and you were sure you would—it was awful, but you could stave that off until everyone and everything was safe. “Who’s—who’s going to be on the other side of the connection?”

Ratchet hesitated the briefest moment. “Bumblebee is the only personnel on hand with the required training. He should be able to perform the procedure with minimal risk. Do you need anything else?”

“...No. thanks for the update,” you said, quietly.

Ratchet swept out of the room without a backwards glance.

You sat back, wincing as tired leg muscles protested changing position after so long. This was interesting news. Ratchet and Optimus had always been upfront about what they did. Bulkhead’s
role was self-explanatory enough that you had put it together—he built and he broke, usually in situations that made it particularly difficult to do so. Arcee had shared stories about having been a special agent back in the day; something a little like Captain America and a little like General Grievous, from the sound of it. She had been the one they sent when they needed to salt the earth.

Bumblebee, though, you were drawing a blank on. He was a scout, certainly; but you wondered if that was general forces, or special operations. You didn’t know enough about the Autobots’ formal command to speculate, honestly, but you couldn’t help but wonder if Bulkhead’s history as a Wrecker wasn’t as unique as you had assumed.

You supposed it wasn’t your business, but—well. Your brain had stuck Bee in the same file as Jack and Miko and Raf, and it was difficult to imagine him...well. In a war.

This wasn’t news to you, you reminded yourself. You were just making yourself sad and anxious because you were already sad and anxious. You focused stubbornly on the vitals chart, trying to fall back into the trance that had kept you focused for hours.

You checked the time on your phone. It was...well, more early than late. Wonderful. Your phone was still open to your text message history with Optimus. You went to close it, when something caught your eye. There, underneath the blurry, unflattering thumbnail of your video, the message had been marked: Read at 3:50AM.

You took a long, deep breath, and thought of stars.

…

“What do you mean, she escaped?” Elita snapped.

Chapter End Notes

Fowler's reports generally go into three folders: Verified, He's Fucking With Us, and Shit, No He Wasn't. You need SCI clearance and a healthy sense of humor to really appreciate any of them.
Celestial Sphere

Chapter Summary

The celestial sphere is a construct used in positional astronomy, wherein all celestial objects are considered as they move relative to the observer. Since the cosmos shift too gradually to make a discernible difference night to night, one can imagine they stand in the middle of a sphere, with all the stars and the planets resting on the surface.

Chapter Notes

Some good news and some bad news! It's really the same news, but it's multi-faceted. This story will be going on hiatus for a while; possibly for only a week, possibly until the end of July. There's a separate story i'm working on that desperately needs attention, and until I at least have the second draft for that banged out, this will be on hold. The flip side of that is that I've got a separate 20k piece in the mix, which is very exciting and will hopefully be a lot more legible once I'm able to give it my undivided attention.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“We have it. Arcee, pull him out of it and prepare for immediate extraction--”

“Negative—repeat, negative, we are not clear, we do not have a discreet contact point--”

The blast of sound from the Bluetooth speaker after solid minutes of silence was almost certainly the worst thing you had heard all night. You forced yourself to relax, heart pounding, and scrabbled for your phone to check the time. Bumblebee had only been under for about ten minutes. You hadn’t been privy to what, precisely, Bumblebee had transmitted back from the cortical patch, but the soft gasps and murmured cussing filtering through the line spoke of predictably not awesome things. You hadn’t exactly assumed the mind of a dying dictator would be a vacation spot to begin with; but judging by the traumatized edge to Ratchet’s voice when he whispered the name of a fallen city you only just barely recognized, it was worse than that.

You were so tired. The universe needed to leave these people alone so that you could sleep.


“They’re here,” she murmured. “Almost the entire high command. They’re gathered around him, talking about—frag. Ratchet, how long until Bee’s ready to completely disconnect?”

“Any moment now. Why?”

“Because they’re talking—damn them. They’re talking about taking Megatron off life support. Ratchet, tell Bee to in initiate the ending sequence now, we’re officially out of time--!”

“Tell me something I don’t know. Bumblebee, come in. Initiate the ending sequence now, you
cannot be within the psychic link when he goes offline. Confirm. Bumblebee, please conf--"

The comm line roared. You clapped your hands over your ears, shutting your eyes instinctively.

When it finally died down, Arcee, Ratchet and Bee were all speaking in out-and-out Cybertronian. You couldn’t tell tone as well as you would have liked, but they sounded positively frantic.

As you were considering who to text to ask what the hell had just happened, the sound of your own name snapped your attention back to the present. “We’ll need another cot for recovery,” Ratchet said brusquely. “There may be complications upon Bumblebee’s arrival. Wheeljack is en route to help set up, but we’ll need the computer system ready to receive once he gets there. The protocol is pre-programmed and marked in English, do you see it?”

Cursing under your breath, you stomped on a button to wake the console up and scanned the desktop. Belatedly, you pulled your phone out to join the comm line yourself. “Hey. The little medical symbol?”

“That’s the one. En route in thirty seconds from bridging signal. We’re waiting for a secure opening, but that could happen in hours or seconds. Hurry it up.” The line cut out completely.

You weren’t great at operating the Cybertronian-sized consoles, but you had a feeling you would have been a lot better at it if you had developed more of a taste for Dance Dance Revolution. You hopped repeatedly on the right arrow, cursing Ratchet, the Decepticons, yourself, and also God just for the hell of it. You needed shoes with better grip.

Wheeljack rounded the corner just as you stomped on the enter button. “Aww. That was adorable.”

“Don’t start.” You checked the vitals chart. By now, it was ingrained. The news was about as bad as it had been five minutes ago. “Where’s the cot?”

“Yeah, I’ll handle that bit.” He unstrapped it from the interior of the sliding closet door, rattling it to get the legs to unstick. There are some cords underneath that you can get ready, though.”

You peered over the edge of the console into the empty space beyond.

“On second thought--” Wheeljack grabbed them himself, pausing to pat you on the head with the tip of his finger. “I got it.”

You batted his hand away. “I’d rather you not do that, at the moment. Is there anything else we need to get ready?”

“Nah. Now we wait for the signal to start panicking, basically.” He leaned against the wall, Arcee-style. “You want to get Bee’s medical chart ready?”

His fingers didn’t look broken to you, but you climbed back onto the keyboard anyway. “Why can’t you do it?”

He ignored you, glancing over at Optimus. “Wow. He looks like the bottom of a five-car pileup.”

“Yes.” You stomped the next button with more force than was strictly necessary. “Well, we’re working to fix that.”

“Yup.” He fell silent. “Huh. Must really be having trouble getting ‘em out of there.”

You glanced over. Now that you were paying attention, there was a frenetic energy to Wheeljack that you hadn’t quite noticed before. He couldn’t seem to decide where to look, even if his head...
stayed stubbornly relaxed against the wall. The heel he had kicked up casually against the wall was bouncing nervously. Wheeljack could have been the dictionary picture for forced nonchalance.

You let him do his thing. Everyone was on edge; and if he was going to deal with it with...whatever that was, it was no skin off your nose.

(Or if it was, it was skin you were alright with losing. You had punched people at funerals before. A little obnoxiousness now was nothing.)

A low, tonal beep echoed from somewhere. Wheeljack sat bolt upright; and taking your cue from him, you whirled to face the door.

A few tense moments later, Ratchet took the corner at dead run, Bumblebee slumped over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry. He set him down on the spare caught without addressing either of you, hands blurring over the console as he frantically scanned—well, something. It was the same sine curve that was mirrored in less prominent detail on Optimus’ screen, but subtly different, as if the values had been shifted.

You stood on your toes to scan Bee, looking for injuries. His eyes were dull and unlit rather than closed, but you couldn’t see any visible wounds. You weren’t reassured.

Whatever Ratchet saw relaxed him enough to slump, sighing long and deep, before he turned to you. “You have little to no experience in advanced chemistry, correct?”

You shrugged. “Not unless calling my mom counts—”

“It doesn’t.” Ratchet cut you off. “Go and sleep. Fowler and Bulkhead will be in to take up vigil so that we—” he gestured begrudgingly at Wheeljack—“Can work as efficiently as possible. Arcee is ferrying the kids home.”

“That’s it, then?” Your voice wobbled without your permission. “We have the cure?”

“We will.” His voice softened a fraction. “The children will want to see you before they leave. Out.”

You stole one more glance at Optimus and Bumblebee, still and side by side, and fled.

…

Jack and Arcee had already gone; probably because he was ricking the worst consequences should he not be home by sunrise. Miko and Raf were on the sofa on the catwalk, playing an uncharacteristically docile game of that street racing game they were so fond of. You paused to collect the blanket pile before you joined them, navigating the ladder with some difficulty. “Hey, you two.”

Raf paused it, smiling weakly. Miko shoved him until he made room and shuffled to the side herself, so that you could sit in the middle. You did, arranging the blankets over the three of you. “Who’s winning?”

“Whoever’s playing red.” Raf shrugged. “We kind of lost track.”

Miko squinted at the game. “Dude, unpause it for a sec.” She deliberately cranked the joystick to the side, and nodded sagely when the red car swerved into the side of the road nose-first and crashed with a sad, pixellated noise. “Yeah, I won.”

Raf said nothing, but he shot you a wry look. You smiled, hoping your face didn’t look as dry and
stretched as it felt.

Miko let the controller fall into your lap. “So, like. Are you gonna make us talk about our feelings, or what?”

You made a face. "You're welcome to?"

“Huh. I kind of figured you’d be all over that.” She considered you with way too much perception for a hyper fifteen-year-old. “How are you feeling?”

“Honestly?” Like you’d just sat in a room for eight hours while other people actually worked to solve the problem. Like the only thing you were good for was standing by and hoping there was enough pieces left for you to try to put them back together once the crisis had passed. You felt like you had failed—no.

You felt like you all had succeeded, but in spite of you, not because of you.

“I feel like I kind of missed the action,” you said out loud. “I don’t think I was very helpful.”

“Nah, you were,” Miko said carelessly. “I’m pretty sure the fact that Optimus wasn’t actively dying right in front of his eyeballs is part of why Ratchet was so chill tonight. Little stuff, you know?”

“That was Ratchet being chill in a crisis?”

“Yup.”

“Yeah...” Raf shrugged. “It’s not like he panics, he’s just...less calm. And, you know, it’s Optimus. I kind of thought he’d be snarling at everyone the entire time.”

“Well, he was,” Miko pointed out. “Just not all of the time.”

“...Well.” There wasn’t a lot you could say to that. “I’m glad I helped?”

“Yeah.” Raf yawned. “Do we have school tomorrow? We need to not have school tomorrow.”

“You do not. I, on the other hand, will have work.”

“Call in sick,” Miko and Raf ordered in creepy unison.


The three of you lapsed into silence.

“It doesn’t feel over,” Raf whispered. “It feels like we’re waiting for the shoe to drop.”

Miko reached around you to tussle his hair. “it’ll be better once they’ve actually got the antivirus juice going. We’re just, you know.” Out of Raf’s line of vision, her bottom lip quirked as she fought tears. “We’re just waiting.”

Raf leaned into you. ‘Bee’s gonna be alright, right?”

“Right.” You draped a light arm over his shoulders and held the other one out for Miko. She turned so that her back was leaning against you, legs kicked up over the armrest.

The three of you stayed like that for a while.
Deep within the planet, something shifted.

It was not a person. Or if it was, it was only because that was what it had been made into. It did not think, it did not know, and it did not dream; and so for a time, it could pretend that it was not a person again.

But the price of being is that existence rarely leaves anyone alone for more than a little while; and so, something shifted.

Slowly, it knew again. It knew that it was injured. It knew that it had been sundered, a very long time ago, and that its personhood was a symptom of the wound. An infection.

It mourned, and the mourning was familiar.

There were others. Its sibling, for one; the other half that had grown into an opposite. The little ones, forged powerful and bright and deadly. Had they been forged? Or had they simply grown, an accident of cruelty, and unknowingly shaped the thing under their feet to match them.

It—they—he shifted, and began to dream again.

And on the other side of the stars, so did his brother.

Chapter End Notes

Well that's obviously nothing to worry about
The doors would not open. This fact was true before the doors were, the finality of them coming in sharp and sure even as the doors themselves materialized out of the ether. The doors were finite, a prop to interact with. Their being closed was not.

It was a very lucky thing, Optimus reflected, that Orion Pax had learned to pick locks.

It was harder than he remembered. His hands were different now, large and flat and rectangular. Arcee was so much better at it than him—and the image of the vaunted Autobot leader burgling storage units and dumpsters to get at the discarded books within so uncomfortable to some—that it was better to let her handle it when the occasion arose. There was no need to dredge up the aspects of his former identity that had needed discarding, after all; and he was not a disgruntled little archivist any more.

The doors stayed, stubbornly, locked. It seemed the decision not to practice had its drawbacks.

Optimus sighed, stepping back to see the doors all at once. They weren’t just locked; they were Locked. Considering where Optimus was traveling from, and what lay on the other side, this could be nothing less than a pointed gesture.

He sighed, allowing himself a brief moment of mourning for a time when all these histrionics were not necessary. A time when then Matrix—a set of data points, a collection, a connection—did what it was supposed to do.

He shot the lock.

Predictably, the doors exploded, pieces shattering in a blast of heat. Never let it be said that the realm of the Primacy passed up a chance to be dramatic.

The room on the other side was distressingly alike how Optimus had last seen it. Originally designed
for creatures much larger—much wider—than any Cybertronian, the vaulted ceilings and walls were all but hidden by the mists that smothered the ground up to Optimus’ knees. Despite the low visibility, the chamber lent itself to the illusion that it was well-lit, a soft, formless blue light pervading everything. Although the fog was thick and deep, the air felt quite dry, almost sterilized.

Eight thousand years. Optimus had lived entire lifetimes in that span. The crumbling ruins he had once studied and the ancient traditions he had fought against were younger than this place. Planets had turned on their axis and the stars above them had shifted in their skies, and still, this room had the audacity to remain the same.

There were few places he would rather not be more than this room.

Reluctantly, Optimus stepped through the door. It was noticeably colder. The central chamber was a throne room, really, thirteen overly dramatic chairs lining niches in the walls, functionally useless for how far away they were from each other. At the far end, the only original seat to the room towered over them all, apparently carved out of the same material as the walls. Optimus could only just make out the circular patches on the wall behind it, where tubing and electrical cords had once been fed into the room. Originally, they would have reached far enough to plug into whoever sat on the first throne.

The back of Optimus’ neck itched.

When he reached up to scratch, the fingers on his left hand were unraveling into mist. Optimus stared, startled by the lack of pain or gore—ah. That was right, wasn’t it? He was in the midst of dying.

(Not again.)

His time to do what he must was shortening rapidly, then. Either his connection to this place would be eroded as the virus reached the Matrix or his processor lost the ability to keep him coherent enough to remember his task, or Ratchet would pull him back from the brink with a well-timed miracle. In either case, he needed to move.

Optimus picked a corridor at random. The person he sought was here if he was anywhere. He was bound to run into him eventually.

Sure enough, it didn't take long. Slow, ponderous footsteps echoed through the halls, even heavier than Optimus' own. The scent of desiccated, rusting metal filtered through the air. The faintest flicker of firelight slowly grew from imperceptible shadows into a blinding glare, overtaking the dim blue of the walls. By the time Optimus finally emerged into another chamber, this one smaller but equally ancient, he nearly had to shield his face from the light.

The object of his search stood at the opposite end, facing what might have once been a window. Beyond it, there was only darkness.

The rust smell was overpowering. Optimus resisted the urge to put his mask up as he approached, eyeing the figure for any sign of sudden movement. Not that there would be much he could do in his defense, but the instinct persisted. Despite his misgivings, Optimus kept his weapons stubbornly sheathed. He would not be the one to provide an excuse for bloodshed.

"Brother," Optimus said, bowing shallowly.

"Optimus," said a voice that rumbled through the air, as pervading and inescapable as the smell. "The deserter finally returns. But I suppose carrion must, after all. It is your nature."
A promising start. The sad thing was that Optimus was sure they had shared conversations that had begun on worse terms. Whether any of those conversations had wound up improving was another matter entirely, but still.

Prima, first of the Primacy and eldest of the Thirteen turned away from the empty remains of the window like a statue rotating on its plinth. His optics were dull, almost unlit. "What say you, little brother?"

"I say that we are bound to the same master," Optimus said carefully. "And not I to you. Where are the others, Prima? This is not a place to linger in solitude."

"Our master is dead." Prima stepped closer, mesmerizingly slowly. Optimus stood his ground with a conscious effort. "All that is left is his pitted, rotting skeleton, picked clean by the very same squabbling hoard you would have us serve. Tell me, Optimus. Does it disgust you to walk upon his corpse? Or have you stripped yourself of any vestige of propriety and decency you might have once had?"

Prima was directly in front of him now, a long, looming shadow arching towards the ceiling. Prima was so much more suited for this place than Optimus was, he realized suddenly. He blended into the gloom with unconscious ease, as if he had been born into it. He was even of a size and shape with the doorways, far taller and wider than Optimus was.

This was a mistake. He was never going to find what he needed here.

"Cybertron is our home," Optimus said, knowing full well what was about to happen. "I will not forsake it.

A huge, rotting hand shot out and grabbed Optimus by the head, broad fingers with far too many joints closing over his face, constricting slowly, lovingly, a protracted agony made worse by the fact that it was him--

Ping.

The glare of the firelight returned as Optimus' helm was released, only half-crushed. He stumbled, the room spinning sickeningly. The crushed components at the fringed of his vision sparked and swung, popped loose of their moorings.

Fighting unconsciousness with an effort, Optimus turned to see what had distracted Prima.

Suspended in the air behind him was a HUD alert box, the same Matrix-blue as all Optimus' incoming messages. The extension marked it as a video file, from--

The chamber flickered. For a moment, Optimus' eye was drawn to the source of the firelight--the hearth bored into the ground like a wound, a jagged crevasse filled with bright white fire. It hurt to look at, as it always had. Hadn't it?

Optimus turned back in time to see Prima's long, awful hands reach out and curl around the manifestation of the alert box, one broad fingertip leaving a flake of dull white paint where it pressed the play button. "Don't--!" Optimus moved before he could think, pushing the arm away. Prima let him, optics fixed unblinkingly on the display.

"Hey. Hello. It's—well, it's me. You know who I am," said the tinny, far-off voice of the recording. The human's voice was almost shocking, incongruous with the room it filled. Optimus knew for a fact that the air in this place was the very same air that had filled it when it was first built, barely disturbed and heated nearly into a solid. Light, airiness, awkward well wishes--those had no place
here. Their presence was felt like a rebellion.

Incredibly, Prima let the video play in its entirety. His dull, lifeless gaze didn't stray from the screen. When it ended, silence fell. Optimus did not move, watching his brother for any sign of what might follow.

At last, Prima turned to look at him. "A sweet little thing," he said. "What was its name?"

In one swift, powerful movement, Prima crushed Optimus' head into a fuel-soaked pulp.

... "Rest up, Optimus. you're gonna be okay. It's...it's all going to be okay."

Optimus awoke to the sound of motion--natural, graceless movements, punctuated by the rattle of equipment or the shuffle of footsteps. His sight returned with a whine of bright light, convalescing into the familiar ceiling of the medbay. Pain--endless and pervading, but comfortably real--arced through his entire body in dull, distinct pulses, cutting in and out with the flicker of system damage.

As the rest of his senses started up--electromagnetic sensors a nasty sting, smell a dull tinge at the edge of his awareness--Optimus attempted to sit up, seeking Ratchet. The medbay snapped in and out of focus, equilibrium gone.

This could present a problem.

A comforting red-white blob bustled over. "Well. I certainly hope you've learned your lesson."

"Ratchet." The word was one part relief, one part confirmation. It seemed that his facial recognition software was refusing to come online--or it was missing. Curious.

"It's me," said the wonderfully familiar voice. Optimus did his best to remain pliant as Ratchet went through the standard procedure for waking a patient. "Can you feel that?"

"No." Optimus asked after the human. "I received a message from them--?"

"That's a good sign, at least. Yes, they babysat you while I helped coordinate the rescue efforts. I think they're sleeping now, but I'll get them to write something up for you to review in the morning. Can you feel this?"

"No." Optimus frowned. "This appears to be a fair amount of damage for a relatively short--"

"Twelve hours," Ratchet said, flatly.

"...Ah." That was a disturbing amount of time to withstand a virus. Even putting aside how close to death Optimus had become, he did not look forward to dealing with the aftermath. "It seems I owe you a debt of thanks once again, old friend."

"Shut up. Is anything reading as offline?" Ratchet helped him sit up--an odd sensation since it felt no different from laying down.

"It would be quicker to list what isn't," he said, hoping to lighten the mood.

Disappointingly, Ratchet didn't laugh. "That's a good sign, actually. We can start reintroducing systems one at a time. Run a standard diagnostic scan and tell me what comes up first."

"Ratchet?" The human had appeared in the doorway, looking rumpled. "Wh--"
brightened. "You're awake!"

Optimus greeted them, surprised at the rush of reassurance they inspired. "I thank you, my friend. Your patience--"

"Uh." They were eyeing him with no small amount of concern. "Ratchet--?"

"Hm." Ratchet stepped swiftly between them. "You're speaking in Iaconic Cybertronian. Can you switch to English?"

He had thought he had. "I don't believe so, no," Optimus told him around the uncomfortable feeling in his chest. Sensors were one thing. Language systems were another entirely. Optimus had been blinded, deafened, and knocked partially offline in dozens of different configurations, but the ability to communicate was--well. It was something Orion had treasured.

"Can you understand me?" The human asked warily, eyes darting to Ratchet.

Optimus bobbed his head consciously, missing the grace of the atmospheric package already. They relaxed somewhat, grinning at him. There were prominent circles under their eyes. "That's something. How are you?"

"In no state for visitors," Ratchet said pointedly. "You both need your rest. You can talk in the morning, but until then I don't want you to move from that sofa."

They made a face at Ratchet, but turned to go. "Wait," Optimus said, somewhat uselessly. "Ratchet, if you would tell them--"

"Tell them yourself, in the morning," Ratchet said pushily. "Diagnostic time. Go on."

Just before they disappeared back around the corner, the human made a grouchy face behind Ratchet's back, caught Optimus' eye, and smiled.

Chapter End Notes

WELL THAT'S OBVIOUSLY NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT
**Troposphere**

Chapter Summary

The layer of a planet's atmosphere closest to the surface. Home to all known forms of nonaquatic life on Earth.

Chapter Notes

Guess who's got two thumbs, college in a week, and about six weeks of hiatus to make up?
As we head into the school year, I'm gonna try to keep making this story a priority. Whether or not that's going to happen is a fun adventure we're all going to go on together, but if I don't update one week, the update will be made up another week when I have more time. Updates will be all over the place while I find a good rhythm and start to make up that long break, but they will continue. Cold Welding, the story that ate July and August, has been out a week or so, so if anyone wants something to tide them over between updates, feel free to check that out!
Thank you all for your patience and support, once and again. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You slept better than expected.

That still wasn’t great, but honestly, you needed the little victories. Every other hour, you’d wake up in a vague panic, absolutely certain that something was terribly, terribly wrong. What it could be or why it was definitely your fault remained unclear, but that didn’t keep you from almost falling over the catwalk railing in a haze of sleep deprivation and panic. Eventually, Ratchet set up a tiny little cot in the corner of the medbay, underneath some equipment. The illusion of a lower ceiling helped, somehow.

It was also good to have a line of sight on Ratchet and Optimus. The sheer relief that washed over you once you spotted them was...probably something you should address, you realized. Those were some intense reactions to people’s presence, even for you. you’d think about it in the morning. Eventually. For now, you were literally just too tired to freak out over your subconscious’ choice in comfort people.

(Even if that choice was Robot Dr. House and the literal ruler/spiritual leader/military head of an alien planet. Jesus.)

The time for beating yourself up over getting too emotionally attached could come once you were no longer hallucinating, or whatever the heck was going in there. You kept having this jarring pseudo-dream of Bumblebee, staring at you from the doorway across the room with unnaturally bright eyes. That was an eerie one, especially so many times in quick succession, but no one else was reacting to him and you figured it wasn’t something to worry about. If that strange, uncannily still figure was really Bee, Ratchet would have been in his face in a flash for being out of bed.
without permission. Still, it was weird, seeing someone who was ordinarily so friendly and kind looking so...spooky.

Eventually, you just kind of stopped reacting to it. The planet spun in space, the galaxy rotated around itself, and there was a very angry robot between you and pretty much anything that could hurt you. When you woke up again, Bumblebee would either be there or not, but in the meantime, it was easy to sleep.

(Seriously? You asked your subconscious at some point in the night. That one?)

The other figure had shrugged. You’re the one who picked them out, bud. If you wanted cooler friends, you shouldn’t have had such shit taste.)

Dreams of unfamiliar friends and unhelpful conversations with mirrors aside, you did eventually drop off for good. Come morning, though, you were feeling decidedly less optimistic. Your mouth was gummy. Your back ached. Overall, all the various reasons why you hated waking up noon had come to beat you to death with a Wiffle bat. After-lunch mornings were just...bad. It was like your body couldn’t decide if it was exhausted or sleepy, and until it made up its mind, you were stuck in the Bad Zone. You weren’t sure what you were feeling, beyond: Bad.

You excavated yourself from today’s version of the Blanket Mass and stumbled out from under the table. There was a certain quality to waking up in a room scaled for being several times your size that was reluctantly cheering. It reminded you of the Borrowers book you read as a kid; like maybe breakfast would be half of a piece of bread as tall as you were and some orange juice drunk out of a thimble.

Or bottled water from the mini-fridge. On an intellectual level, you understood that you weren’t going to be able to function without a certain amount of carbs, vitamins, and protein if you were going to deal with the regularly scheduled shenanigans, but at the same time? You had used up your ability to Deal With Shit last night, and until you refilled the Sanity Tank, you were doing what you could with what you had.

Houseplant-like, the water helped spiff you up a little. Before you went too much further, you washed off the worst of the sweat and stress from the last night in the decontamination shower. The water was cold, the soap was harsh, and the shampoo was the weird kind Fowler bought, but in the end, you were clean with fluffy hair, and that was what really mattered.

Your phone told you it was about one-thirty when you finally emerged, and your disoriented sense of time tentatively agreed. When you stepped out into the hall, you found that the base was filled with the far-off noises of busy people avoiding one particular room. Optimus wasn’t in the medbay, but you doubt Ratchet had allowed him to make it very far.

A minimal amount of poking around revealed that Ratchet had set up a private room in the storage room a couple of rooms over—close enough that he could have everything around without moving boxes, but still far enough that they could have a little privacy. Optimus was sitting on the edge of his cot, obediently leaning forward so that Ratchet could finished plugging something into the back of his neck. Bumblebee was still unconscious, but you could make out the faint whirring of his systems. For some reason, the scene struck you as endearingly domestic.

Then Ratchet followed Optimus’ gaze back to you, standing in the doorway like a sappy idiot, and scowled so hard his face shaped itself like an ‘n’. “Nice of you to join us, finally. How many hours did you sleep?”

“Accumulatively?” You shrugged, doing the calculations to see how much you could pad your
estimate before you were called out on it. “Maybe five.”

The ‘n’ of unhappiness intensified. Ratchet gestured at the cot like a scorned preschool teacher. “Prima

mus forbid I get a straight answer out of any of you idiots. Come sit next to Optimus. You can keep each other from cracking your heads open when one of you inevitably dozes off.”

“I’m fine,” you insisted, a tad more snappishly than you meant to. “I can help out, I promise. What’s the first thing on the list?”

He bent down and scooped you up. “It’s sitting quietly and making sure no one backslides into another coma while I put the rest of the base in order. With any luck, we can all keep from hurting ourselves long enough for the kids to come home.”

Optimus buzzed gently, and Ratchet turned and glared at him. Apparently, his crisis-induced calm had well and truly worn off. Additionally, judging by the way he was muttering as he stalked off to check on Bee, the emotional hangover from so long in emergency mode was something you were all going to experience together.

Suppressing a wave of childishness, you scaled the side of the cot and plopped yourself down next to Optimus. “Hey,” you said, trying not to let your irritation with Ratchet’s mood bleed into your voice. “How’s it going?”

Optimus smiled at you—a thin, jerky expression, like he was trying to put it on his face step-by-step. It looked like he was still missing some programming then. It was kind of him to put in the effort, though; particularly when you considered just how weird a lot of emotional expression must have been if you lacked the instinct to interpret it. You tried to imagine what a laugh or a smile would be like if your brain didn’t automatically know what it meant. You pressed your lips together, suddenly self-conscious. Maybe it would be better if you left Optimus alone for now.

Something brushed your back, and you looked up. Optimus brought the hand he had used to get your attention up to touch his fingers to his chin, and then out as if he was holding a platter. Thank you.

Aww. You had no idea what the ASL was for you’re welcome, so instead you just dipped your head in a loosely defined bow. “No problem.”

You made a conscious effort to relax. If you didn’t move on, you were going to think about it, and if you thought about it, you were going to get embarrassed over yourself, and that was never a fun time when you were over-tired. Instead, you straightened and did your best impression of a functioning human. “Scale of one to ten, with ten being normal and one being last night—how do you feel?”

Eight fingers. Or seven. One of his fingers was twitching, which could have been a symptom of the plague or an attempt to convey a seven and a half. “That’s...better? How much—wait a minute.”

You started over. “On the same scale, how close are you to having all your programming back in working order?”

“If he answers with anything higher than an eight,” Ratchet called across the room, “he’s a fragging liar.”

Optimus obediently put down a finger.

You snorted. Optimus blinked slowly, watching you. You hoped you had seemed amused, and not...however snorts were interpreted on Cybertron.

Wait a minute. The Autobots didn’t have noses. You had heard plenty of sighs and snorts and other
respiratory-related noises from the Bots, but they were all part of the atmospheric package. You thought, anyway. Maybe it had just looked like you breathed a little harder than normal. Except that Optimus could obviously understand English. he just couldn’t speak it. Maybe he was picking up on your body language after all.

...Optimus was still looking at you. He probably had been for a while. Nice to see that your attention span was still just as sharp and functional as ever. God, you were going to sleep forever.

Before you could parse out just how embarrassed you needed to be, the door opened and Wheeljack sauntered in. “Hey, so--”

Something tiny and orange darted around his legs, and Wheeljack broke stride to avoid accidentally stepping on Raf. “Whoa--!”

Ignoring the screech of cursing from Wheeljack and Ratchet, Rad scaled the side of the cot in record time and pressed himself against Bee’s shoulder, muttering sharp and quick. It was tough to tell over the distance, but you would have bet he was shaking.

Ratchet made an aborted gesture to pluck him up and thought better of it. “Wheeljack, stop screaming, you’re fine. Raf. Rafael, come here.”

Raf shook his head, still pressed against Bee’s plating. Ratchet scowled.

You snapped yourself out of a daze just as Optimus carefully, carefully pushed himself to his feet. “Ratchet--” You both spoke at the same time, albeit in different languages, glanced at each other, and tried again. The same thing happened.

Ratchet waved the both of you off. “I don’t need the same lecture in two different languages, I have enough of a headache as it is. Wheeljack, get some blankets. Short one, sit down. Tall one, also sit down—you heard me.”

You, unarguably the short one, sat back down next to Optimus. You had a name. It was a nice name. You didn’t know why no one around here ever fucking used it, but it was getting old fast.

Wheeljack came back with the Blanket Mass you had set aside when you went to make your bed. Ratchet snatched them with a surly thank you and, looking very much like he’d rather dump the pile on the kid as-is, he carefully draped one sheet on top of the other over Raf’s tiny body, tucking him in as best he could.

Optimus beeped at Ratchet, quietly. His voice still sounded like him, you noticed; just in a different language.

“’No’m not,” Raf muttered. It took you a moment to realize he answering Optimus. “I’m okay.”

“Of course you are,” Ratchet said consolingly, adding a seventh blanket.

As covertly as you could, you climbed down and jogged over to Bee’s cot before Ratchet could yell at you. When you got to the top, you could see that Raf looked pretty much as bad as you felt, but worse because he was just such a little person. “Hey, bud. You want some soup?”

Raf shifted, slumping a little bit. The blankets barely stirred. “Nn.”

“Okay.” You considered. “Hug?”

A barely imperceptible nod. You waved Ratchet off and wrapped your arms around him, blankets
and all. Disgruntled, Ratchet put the last blanket over the both of you. You fished your head out from underneath and stuck your tongue out, careful to keep your pettiness out of Raf’s line of sight.

After a long moment, Raf reluctantly switching his clinginess from Bee’s shoulder to you. He was significantly heavier than you anticipated, buried as he was, but you made do.

You just sat there, tired and emotionally disturbed, and well aware that the twelve-year-old pressing his forehead into your sweater like he was trying to leave an impression had it ten times worse than you did. You tried to imagine what you would have done if all this had fallen in your lap when you were twelve. There probably would’ve been a lot more tantrums, probably.

Raf muttered something into your shoulder. You pushed his head away a little bit with an effort. Inertia was a hell of a thing. “What’s that?”

“Is this my fault?” Raf whispered hoarsely.

“No,” you said, trying to put as much solid, unyielding certainty into your voice as possible. “Not at all. Not even a little.”

At some point, Optimus had come over, standing with one hand resting on the cot as if for balance. Ratchet was hovering in the background, looking a twitch away from tossing him back onto his cot like a sack of potatoes.

Optimus began to speak, and it sounded like music. His voice rose and fell along a single, even beat, like the meaning itself would be the melody if you could just figure it out. It was continuous and rolling and definitively unlike the low buzzes and beeps he had spoken in before.

Raf had stilled, head tipped back to listen. Slowly, the tension bled out of his hold on you, until he was just slumped in a sad, blankety pile, all his attention focused on Optimus.

Optimus fell silent abruptly. He hadn’t even been speaking all that long, you realized; it had just...Familiar. You thought back to the phone call you had taken at your old house, and the way Optimus had spoken brighter than everyone else. Huh. Apparently that was a thing.

Raf nodded, sitting up. “Okay. I’ll do my best.” He still looked absolutely miserable, but he didn’t look like he needed a constant hug anymore. He tried to shrug off a couple of blankets, failed, and smiled sheepishly at you. “I’m stuck.”

You stood and offered him a hand. “You want out?”

He cast another look at Bee. “Nah. I’m good for now. Thanks for—just thank you.”

“No problem. Listen to Ratchet, okay?” You patted his shoulder. “He’s taking good care of Bee.”

“Mm.” He wriggled so that he was more or less leaning against Bee, peering out at the world from a fleecy, overly protected fort.

Optimus offered you a hand to step onto, fingers spread. You waited until he realized his mistake and made a solid surface before you stepped on.

“No, I’ll take that, thanks. You focus on not tipping over.” Ratchet expertly slid you into his own
hands, shooing Optimus away. Once he was back where he was supposed to be, then he set you down. “Lean forward, I need to reattach you.”

Optimus obediently leaned forward for the card at the back of his neck. You rearranged yourself into a sitting position. You had knocked your knees when Ratchet had set you down rather than letting you step off yourself, and now you had a chance to process it, they were actually starting to ache pretty good.


You and Ratchet shot Wheeljack similarly grumpy looks. He ducked around the corner just that much faster.

You straightened your legs. No, that just hurt more. “What was that?”

Optimus started to sing an explanation at you, stopped, started to beep it, made a sound like a garbage disposal and gave up, looking faintly frustrated. Ratchet chuckled at him. “Cycling through the choices, are we? You’d be less confused if you put some of those away, like you’re supposed to.”

Optimus just looked at him. Ratchet sighed, turning to you. “That was basic Iaconic, another Cybertronian language. A local one, rather than the universal language Bumblebee uses.” His chin lifted just a hair. “Optimus’ birth language, so to speak. And mine.”

“It was beautiful,” you said honestly, wrapping your tired head around this new development with an effort. “It was like music.”

Ratchet nodded, looking pleased. “One of the finest. Remind me to tell you about localized languages once you can retain the knowledge for longer than five minutes.”

“Is that the easiest language for you to speak right now?” you asked Optimus sympathetically. He made a slow, careful so-so motion with his hand.

“Mn.” Ratchet ducked around the cot to grab a datapad, plugging the other end of the cord into it. “Think of it this way: his processor knows that he’s speaking in a different language than the other people around him. Since it’s a language he has the relevant data for, it keeps trying to switch; but since he doesn’t have the identifiers he needs to access that data, it keeps picking a different language at random, hoping it’ll get lucky.” He studied the datapad silently, face intent.

Then, Ratchet smiled. “Heh.”

“What’s up?” You eyed him warily. That was a weird expression, under the circumstances.

“I’ve been saying it since the Academy. The prophecy had been fulfilled. You,” he told Optimus, sticking a finger in his face, “officially, objectively know too many languages.”

Optimus’ expression didn’t waver as he swatted Ratchet’s finger away. Ratchet waved a hand at him and walked off, still smiling. Optimus waited a good few seconds to make sure Ratchet wasn’t looking before the corner of his mouth twitched upwards.

Dorks.

Chapter End Notes
Optimus, with a political position that literally relies on his ability to express himself clearly and eloquently: is there any way to make this go faster
Ratchet, Very Tired: no
Wheeljack wound up dropping you off just within sight of Jasper’s edge. You weren’t eager to get pulled over for driving a literal race car down Jasper’s Main Street, and Wheeljack probably didn’t feel like breaking out of the impound, so it worked out for everyone. Walking in the warm, dry breeze satisfied a craving you hadn’t realized you had. Spending late November off the coast of northern Maine did that to a person. There was nothing like spending a week in Basically Canada to renew your appreciation for a warm winter.

The evening was breathtaking. You were in that time when the sky was going old and pale, the edge of the planet’s diurnal period creeping over the expanse of the sky in an indelible line. The hot, sandy asphalt crunched comfortably under your feet; above you, birds circled in the distance. Best of all, directly in front of you, Jasper was a faded patch of gray in the distance. The sight of it put a core of warmth in your chest. You had missed it more than you had anticipated. The silhouette of it was exactly the way it was—battered and rough, little and weary, and so powerfully alive it took your breath away.

(Was the sky large enough to swallow it, or was the town small enough to pierce? Was there a difference?)

The sky darkened in increments as the sun finally set. The light dimmed startlingly quickly, until it was a struggle to see your own feet in front of you. Tension that you hadn’t realized was there slowly bled out of your shoulders as the first stars appeared overhead.

A good night.

The sign for Wen’s Diner loomed out the darkness, a splash of color against in a sea of By the time you reached it, the neon lighting was brighter than the area around, and the glow from its windows was almost a glare. If there had ever been a good night for apple pie, this was it.

You checked your wallet. You didn’t have enough on you for pie, but you could definitely spring for a cup of coffee, at least, and the chance to check in on the evening crowd was worth it. You hitched your pack a little higher, eager to put it down for a while.

The door jingled welcomingly, as it always had. It took you a moment to realize why you had noticed it now—the room inside had gone dead quiet. Furthermore, as you stepped out of the darkness, you realized that every face inside was turned towards you. There was Martin the Mechanic—surname not given—sitting at the counter with a milkshake. There was Mrs. Nguyen, your terrifyingly nosy neighbor, her husband half-standing in the booth across from her to try and get a look at you. In the corner, Miko’s English teacher, Mrs. Johnson, offered you a smile.

So many familiar faces. So much attention. You should have kept walking.
“Uh,” you said, sounding acceptably un-strangled, as far as you could tell. “Hey, folks.” You tried an idiotic little wave. It did nothing to dispell the feeling that you had been cast in a cliché western movie without noticing, but you thought you heard someone in the stalls stifle a laugh.

The silence stretched, settled down, and curled up for a nap, content to stay for a while.

You found a seat. Everyone else did their best to pretend they weren’t looking at you, and you did your best not to notice. No one was very good at it.

Mr. Wen stuck his head through the kitchen doors. “What on earth is—hey! Hey, you!”

“Hey, me?” You stood up and accepted an expectedly enthusiastic hug, incredibly confused. “Glad to see you, too, but what’s—umph.”

The umph was the most succinct reaction you could muster to being picked up right out of Mr. Wen’s hug and into the arms of Tini, burger counter aficionado and apparently one of two women under twenty you knew who could pick you up and hold you with no visible strain. You tried to catch your breath, accidentally inhaled a lungful of artfully styled afro, and just gave breathing up as a lost cause for the moment.

“Oh my god,” Tini said into your shoulder. “We heard just all sort of things about you, you can’t just do that—”


“Oh, beans. Sorry.” Tini set you down, holding you at arm's length. “Baby, you’re just a mess. Half the town’s going spare, you’re the talk of the whole place—”

“I am?” You said, dumbly. Your brain was not equipped for...whatever this was. “Why? I was gone for a week—”

“Yeah, you were gone for a week!” Called Mrs. Nguyen from across the room. She looked about ready to go up and interrogate you then and there. “Didn’t hold your mail, didn’t get a house-sitter—”

“After your fight with June, poor dear, she was so worried—” simpered a tall, gangly man you knew by sight from the grocery store, letting his arms dangle over the back of his chair.

“Your grandma died, someone said? Why’d your grandma die—ow!” Martin reached over and smacked whoever that was on the arm, waving at you apologetically.

The noise was beginning to get to you. The fact that you hadn’t eaten since supper the night before was finally catching up to you, apparently. Spots, danced over your vision, were your only warning before your sense of equilibrium began to slide out of place. I’m gonna fall over in front of half the township of Jasper, you realized, profoundly irritated, and at this rate, the other half is gonna know about it before sun-up.

CLANG.

Every eye in the place turned towards the kitchen doors. Paradoxically, there was Mr. Callighan, standing in the middle of Wen’s Diner with a frying pan in one hand and a heavy chrome spoon in the other just as calmly as if it was his own living room. “Enough.”

He jerked his head at Mr. Wen for him to follow, disappearing back into the kitchen. Instead of springing to attack, as you had honestly expected, Mr. Wen had taken advantage of the distraction to slide in front of you, half-guiding, half-hip checking you back into your seat. “You just sit and drink
your water, hon,” he ordered you. “Tini, keep the wolves back?”

“You got it, other boss,” she said cheerily.

“Dear of you,” Mr. Wen said happily, and zoomed away into the kitchen, the doors fluttering in his wake.

As a collective, everyone returned to casting odd looks at you around their drinks. Tini grabbed her plate and sat next to you, taking a large, defiant bite out of her macaroni and cheese.

“What,” you said, utterly exhausted, “is going on?”

Tini shrugged. “What’d you think is up? You disappeared for like, a solid week.”

“I went on a trip,” you said, “to New Hampshire. To visit my family.”

“You leave without telling anyone,” a familiar voice said, gently, “right after a fight. You don’t make any preparations, you don’t give any indication of where or why, and the info anyone seems to have is some kind of family emergency.”

You closed your eyes, feeling entirely too emotional. June Darby stepped into your line of vision, looking a solid decade older than she had a week ago, and sat down. “Then, you walk back out of the desert at dusk, looking like you’d gotten over the plague. Can you blame us for being a little worried?”

You tried to meet her eyes. “June--”

“Wait.” She studied your face intently for something. “Hug first.”

You met her halfway, the corner of the table digging into your stomach. She felt smaller than you remembered, like you were wrapping her up, rather than the other way around. June wasn’t exactly a touchy woman, but you could feel her arms squeezing through your sweater.

Something had happened.

You bit back the urge to ask then and there, aware of so many eyes on you. Instead, you sighed, trying to let yourself relax. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered in your ear. Her voice creaked. “We’re okay.”

Tini eyed the two of you. “Y’all better not be crying all at once. I only got so many tissues.”

You choked on a laugh and tried to pull back. June held on a half-second too long. Jesus. If someone had messed with another one of your friends, you swore to God-- “Are you okay?”

“Mm. Just some tough choices. I think I made the right one, though.” She pulled back and smiled at you.

Something rough and uneven settled in your chest, like a puzzle piece clicking back into place. “I--”

“It’s--” June said at the same time. You both stopped, blinking at each other. Somehow, prolonged eye contact turned into weak, relieved laughter, and then straight up giggling like a couple of school kids.

You were so glad to be home.
In the middle of this, Mr. Callighan returned. He sat in the only remaining chair. “Ah. I see they have finally cracked.”

“Yup.” Tini sat up, trying to see through the kitchen window. “They growin’ the food fresh back there, or what?”

“Hi, Mr, Callighan,” you said cautiously. It looked like him and sounded like him. Maybe this was a cloning thing. It was like meeting “Fancy meeting you here.”

He made a face. Tini leaned in, pleased as punch. “You haven’t heard? He’s living here, these days.”

What. “What?” you said, uselessly. “What. What?” This pinnacle of Jasper history was taking place, and people were staring at you because you’d taken a vacation?

“It is only until my head wound is gone,” Mr. Callighan said, in the manner of a man who has had to say it more times than he deemed strictly necessary. “Until I am out of the danger zone, as they say.”

“That was three days ago,” June muttered. You smiled into your water glass, trying to be subtle. Judging from the pointedly patient look Mr. Callighan had leveled in your direction, you didn’t do a good job.

Mr. Wen appeared with a full plate of food and a chair. He slid the former to you, plunked the latter down on Tini’s other side, and elbowed Mr. Callighan out of the way so that he could sit. “Well! This is a nice little get-together. Let me know how it is, there are some of the girls’ favorites in there.”

“I--” There was what looked like a full portion of just about everything piled on the plate. Macaroni and cheese, hash browns, a noodle dish you couldn’t identify… “This—it looks incredible, but I can’t pay for--”

“Oh the house,” Mr. Wen, Mr. Callighan and Tini all said at once. Mr. Wen wrinkled his nose at Callighan.

“No, it’s--” you tried.

“You are not the house,” Mr. Wen said tartly. “You presumptuous old--”

“Sorry, said Tini, comfortably.

“You’re fine, dear.” Mr. Wen added sweetly.

“--I can pay another--”

“I helped cook,” Mr. Callighan said succinctly. “And you forgot the sauerkraut, honestly--”

“Boy is this good,” you said loudly. You hadn’t taken a bite yet. “Here, June, have a little.”

She accepted a forkful of macaroni. Tini helped herself to a dumpling while you dug through your wallet for change. If you were quick, you could put it in the tip jar before anyone could stop you.

“Eat,” Mr. Callighan told you. “Conspire later.”

“Mmph.” You grabbed some mac’n’cheese. It was gooey and delightful, predictably; the sort of mac’n’cheese that only happened when it was made for other people. You shoveled in another bite. They let you eat for a bit. Between bites, you observed the rest of the table. Mr. Wen and Mr.
Callighan switched between barely civil and staring at each other out of the corner of their eyes, which was, unfortunately, an improvement over what usually went on. June looked absolutely exhausted, but if you wanted to be it seemed like having you around was cheering her up. You wished you knew what had gone on with her while you were in Maine, but for now, the fact that she was here and okay and not mad at you was enough. More than enough.

Tini was Tini, which was nice. She was taking some new online classes at the college, apparently, although she wouldn’t say what for. At one point, Moira ran through the dining area, and they high-fived without breaking stride. Huh.

You basked in the company, keenly aware of how charmed your life was.

Eventually, the restaurant folk had to get up, and Moira and Maive took their places. With their help, you confirmed that your grandmother wasn’t dead, you had gone home for the holidays, and you were significantly less married, missing or wanted by the government than popular rumor might lead one to believe. Hopefully, they’d have that spread around town before dawn.

June gave you a ride home. It would have been peacefully quiet, if you hadn’t spent the entire time trying to figure out how to ask what was up. Your brain felt comfortably muzzy after the large meal.

She pulled into her driveway and turned the car off. Neither one of you got out. June turned to you and offered you a tight, unhappy smile. “So.”

“Yeah.” You were bouncing your knee, you realized. You stopped.

June took a deep breath, as though bracing herself. “First of all, I want to apologize.”

“What?” You frowned. “No, you’re fine--”

“No. Wait. I should have given you the chance to explain, and I didn’t. I panicked, and I shouldn’t have. I think I was...” she considered. “Justified. But not right. I should have kept my faith in you and I didn’t. So I’m sorry.”

You shook your head, wordlessly.

“Jack’s your son,” you said eventually. “I get that, I really do. Kids keeping dangerous secrets from you is the nightmare scenario.”

“Mm.” June sighed. “Can you tell me?”

You bit your lip. You still didn’t have the okay from Optimus.

Her voice wobbled. “Can you tell me if he’s safe?”

“He is,” you whispered, praying you weren’t lying. You didn’t think you were...but. There was a war going on, after all.

“That’s all I needed to hear.”

…

Later, you would never be able to recall walking through your door and dropping your things in a pile in the hallway. You wouldn’t remember dragging yourself down the hall, past the kitchen, past the bathroom, into bed. You wouldn’t remember the way the stars looked just a little brighter out the window, as you sank into your sheets; and you certainly wouldn’t remember your phone, buzzing
fretfully in your pocket as the caller ID tried valiantly to process the information it was given. It failed.

Later, all you would remember was the feeling of being, finally, home.

... 

Bumblebee had been in worse situations, theoretically. He couldn’t think of any; but then, thinking was so much harder than usual. Everything felt...thin. Squished. Crushed.

The cortical psychic patch—that was what had done it. Bumblebee remembered hurrying through withdrawal procedures, trying to balance stress and orders and the hot-cold-clear of someone else’s thoughts. He remembered confusion and struggle, the distinct impression of having been grabbed--

Oh.

He didn’t panic. It was like keeping his feet in a flood, but he didn’t. Bumblebee did not panic, to the exclusion of everything else; and eventually, he could think of other things again. Bee relaxed with an effort, thoughts humming with tension and stress. If he spent the entire time on guard, there wouldn’t be anything left of his to salvage.

In the space within Bee that was not Bee, someone else’s thoughts curled in idle, sadistic amusement, like dried plant matter. Something like metal and fire and weirdly disjointed calculation slammed into him, and Bee was swept back into the tide.

Bee did not panic. For a long time, that was all he could do.

(It was a lucky thing he was good at it.)

... 

June went into her own house and shut the door. Jack had arrived a few minutes before, judging by the blue motorcycle in the garage. She tried not the stare at it too long.

Her office had been specifically chosen as the corner of the house farthest from both the garage and Jack's bedroom. Once upon a time, she had wanted to cut down on extra noise during her conference calls. Now, it was giving her the opposite advantage.

She closed the door behind her. After a moment of consideration, she locked it. Jack knew not to come in if the door was closed, but there was no point in taking chances. Especially when there was more than just the two of them in the house.

June took a fortifying breath. It didn't do much to help, but she tried.

She dialed the number. It rang.

"That was quick," the line said abruptly, as though they had been continuing a conversation. Maybe they were.

"They're back in town," June said shakily. "From New Hampshire, they said. They've mentioned having family there before, so I'm inclined to believe them."

"Leave the believing or not to us. What else?"

June's voice was a little stronger now. Taking the plunge was the hard part, maybe. "I don't think they made any contact with--with anyone, while they were gone. They weren't up to date on Jasper
news, at least. Judging by the state of them, if they really were on some sort of mission, they weren’t successful."

"Perhaps. Anything else, Doctor?"

"No." June shut her eyes, heart pounding.

"Excellent. MECH thanks you for your help, once again. I can assure you that we are doing everything in our power to keep your son safe." The line crackled with movement. "We’ll be in touch."

June set the phone down. Her hands were shaking, she realized.

She was doing the right thing. She had to be.

Chapter End Notes

so we're coming off that hiatus nice and easy i guess
STAR

Chapter Summary

To make the sign for star, point at the sky with both hands close together, alternating which hand is highest. Your index fingers should be close together in front of you, and slightly higher than standard signing level--imagine pointing stars out in the night sky.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“One.”

One.

“Okay. Two.”

Two.

“Three.”

Six.

“That’s six, but you’re close. Switch a finger.”

Nine.

You held up your own hand, with the thumb, index and middle finger extended. “Three.”

Optimus twirled a finger in the air. You realized you were signing with your palm forward and flipped your hand the right way around. Optimus mirrored you: three.

Ratchet rolled his eyes in the background, still mostly focused on Bee, suspended the Star Wars bacta tank-looking thing he’d wheeled out from god-knows-where. “What a breakthrough.”

“Not all of us have the instant download feature,” you reminded him. You were pretty sure he was paying as much attention to you as you were his opinion, but it was still nice to have the last word sometimes.

Optimus was concentrating on flicking his way through ASL numbers 11 through 15, with more success each time he did it. Working with him was nice, especially since neither of you were particularly good at American Sign Language right away. Optimus knew the vocabulary and the grammar, but apparently, his fine motor skills were struggling to catch up. Meanwhile, while you were a quick study, you weren’t computer brain-levels of quick study. You were better at actually signing, and Optimus was the one who actually knew what to sign. If you were the same person, you’d be unstoppable.

American Sign Language was good, too. Your main stumbling block attempting to learn meat-person languages instead of programming languages had always been your pronunciation, and guess what there was none of in ASL. There was still a wrong way to sign, of course, but taking your
mouth out of the equation made things so much better.

(Also, gender-neutral pronouns were the default in ASL. Booyah.)

You consulted your chart, taking care to make sure Optimus couldn’t see it. “Okay, fingerspelling. A? That’s S. There you go. B. No, that’s--” you cringed. Optimus looked down and hastily corrected his sign so that he was no longer calling you a rude word. “Good. C? D? Nope. Index finger is the stem. E—that’s A. That’s S. R. Are you being silly on purpose?”

Optimus put his hands down and shot you a reproving look.

“Sorry. Do you want to go over the fist letters again?”

“The what to the who?” Wheeljack said behind you. “Hey, Prime. Number three. Doc, can I have some tranquilizers?”

Ratchet shot him an impressively hostile look over your head. Optimus subtly shifted so that he was partially blocking Ratchet’s line of sight on Wheeljasck.

“Not for me,” Wheeljack said as if that was supposed to reassure everyone. “Bulkhead’s just been staring at walls again.”

Ratchet groaned. “I thought we were over this.”

Optimus beeped at him reprovingly. Ratchet folded his arms. “What? It’s fine, he’s just overreacting--”

You clapped your hands. “Okay! First of all--” You spun around to look Wheeljack in the eye. “I don’t know why I’m number three or what hierarchy you’ve set me in, but you haven’t learned my name by sundown, you goofy fucking space cowboy, there’s gonna be hell to pay. Second!” You spun on your heels to face Ratchet. “I know you’re tired and angry and sad right now, but you need to sit down and put your god damn compassion hat on. If Bulkhead’s worried, he’s either legitimately concerned and we need to deal with it, or he needs a friend and we still need to deal with it. Dismissing him out of hand is gonna do the opposite of helping, and you know it, dammit, you’re a doctor. Christ.”

You tipped your head back to see Optimus. “You’re good. Keep working on your E’s.”

He offered you a brief, amused nod as you sauntered out the door, gesturing for Wheeljack to follow. Ratchet started to say something just as the door slid shut.

You made it about fifty feet down the corridor before you had to stop and process what you’d just done. You did not like confronting people, you didn’t like snapping at Ratchet, and you hated the way you were absolutely certain everyone in that room now hated you, even though you knew--

“Don’t tell Miko,” Wheeljack said, “But that was pretty smooth for a human. And by don’t tell her, I mean I’m gonna. She’s gonna flip.”

You doubled over with a whine, face in your hands. The embarrassment you’d just effectively bulldozed over had caught up with you, and you were now facing a reality where you’d Said That in front of Ratchet, Optimus, God, and everybody. Maybe literally, since Optimus was the space pope and the Bots gossiped with the same speed and intensity as your average Jasper Bridge Club member. You had made very poor choices.

Wheeljack leaned over you, squinting. “This, I’ll admit, is less smooth. It’s gonna look bad if I have
to get the doc after you just finished storming off, but...”

“M’fine,” you muttered. Your face felt suspiciously hot. “Where’s Bulkhead?”

Apparently content to let you do whatever you needed to, as a small squishy human, Wheeljack scooped you up and started sauntering down a seemingly identical series of twists and turns deeper into the mesa. It had never struck how big the place was, even compared to its main inhabitants.

When the distant murmur had long since faded beneath the steady, unhurried rhythm of Deceit’s footsteps, he spoke. “Gotta question for you.”

You looked up, startled. You couldn’t make out his face against the light of the overhead above him. “Um, sure.”

“What’d you think number three meant?”

“That you still didn’t know my name and you were trying to be cute,” you said honestly. “Is that not what it was?”

“Nah. Well, yeah, actually, but I didn’t come up with it. Jack did.”

“Delightful.” you enjoyed being made fun of behind your back as much as the next schmuck, but it was disquieting to hear that this sort of thing had come from Jack.

“No, it’s like...” Wheeljack waved the hand not holding you noncommittally. “Optimus. Ratchet. Then you. Arcee. Get it?”

“No, it’s like...” Wheeljack waved the hand not holding you noncommittally. “Optimus. Ratchet. Then you. Arcee. Get it?”

“Who comes after me?”

“Arcee. Still nothing? Aw, don’t worry, you’ll get there.” He patted you on the head. “Short lil’ legs and all.”

You batted him away, again. Somebody had some boundary issues. “I’m gonna hurt you and Ratchet will help. Are we close to--”

Wheeljack rounded the corner, and suddenly the hallway in front of you ended in darkness so sharp you were half-afraid there was a drop-off. After a moment, you could make out the dim, unmoving figure of Bulkhead, just barely illuminated by the little lights on his arms and torso. It was an unexpectedly eerie picture.

Then he turned to see the two of you and stepped into the light, and you felt foolish that you were even startled. Bulkhead was just Bulkhead, fanny-related truck accident notwithstanding. He was unnerving because he was big and heavy and clumsy, not because he was anything less than a sweetheart. “Hey, folks. People still busy?”

“You, Wheeljack said easily, letting you down. You dropped three feet and jarred your ankles, but you were basically fine. “You wanna take it from the top?”

Bulkhead eyed you. “You, uh, you don’t have to listen. I can just give you the rundown.”

“I’m interested,” you assured him. “You were talking about the walls before I left, what’s up?”

“Well...” Bulkhead hemmed and hawed with his entire body, which was more than a little impressive. “It—it, uh--”
He stopped. “Y’know what? C’mere.”

You let him pick you up. He was a lot more careful about it than Wheeljack had been. He was leaning against the wall in the background, watching like he was trying to gauge your reaction.

“Okay,” said Bulkhead. “See this?”

You blinked obediently at the wall. “Maybe?”

“These are my stars,” Bulkhead said, and you knew immediately that you didn’t see, not at all. Instead, you listened.

Bulkhead’s voice sank into a dull, thoughtful drone, like he wasn’t paying attention anymore. “It’s not—y’know, the same as you. But it is. This is what my brain was designed to be able to see.” He brushed a hand over the wall. “Loadbearing. Layer of plaster, layer of lead, some reinforced shielding in the core instead of insulation. About sixty years by local measure, give or take a few. The weight is distributed—here. And here, but it shouldn’t be. There’s a fault in the beam that’s making it bend half a degree to the side, see?”

You looked again. All you saw was a wall. “How can you see all this?”

Bulkhead started to say something, frowned, and finally shook his head. “Can’t say. I mean—okay. I know, like, I know, but the words are—words are hard.”

“Words are hard,” you agreed.

Bulkhead fell silent. In the background, Wheeljack shifted.

“S’like,” Bulkhead said finally. “I can see the math. Not the numbers, but—proportions. How stuff interlocks, the tension between this thing and another thing to make it a working wall, and not a pile of rubble. I can just—see the math. Y’know?”

“Maybe,” you murmured. You closed your eyes, trying to imagine the wall again. Wreathed in colors, threaded by lines of weight and geometry… “I...maybe.”

Bulkhead grinned at you like you’d made his day.

You ducked your head, lips quirking. “...Yeah. So, what’s the problem.”

“There might not be one,” Bulkhead said, reluctantly. “But there might be.”

“Might be.” You nodded along, trying to coax him into it. “So?”

He sighed. “Okay. So there’s—that’s something up in the base walls. All of ‘em. I don’t—this is the only interior I’ve been in over here, so I thought it...might be an Earth thing?” Bulkhead looked at you, pleading.

You shrugged. “I am not qualified to comment. You’ve probably forgotten more about building evaluation than I ever learned.”

He didn’t seem comforted. “It’s probably nothing.”

“You don’t think so,” Wheeljack said from the corner. “That, or you’ve developed a fixation.”

“It’s fine. It’s fine, don’t listen to me,” Bulkhead said shortly. “C’mon, let’s go find the others.”
“If you think there’s something wrong, we could at least check,” you said. “Just to be safe?”

“Nah. There’s no easy way to check something like that without putting a hole in the wall. Forget about it, I’m just being crazy.” Bulkhead finally stepped away from the wall, you in hand. “Back in the day, any foreman worth their wage would’ve laughed me off-site.”

“Yeah,” said Wheeljack sardonically. “Because your old foreman was such a pillar of rationality and fairness.”

Still, he followed behind Bulkhead, glancing back at the wall every few feet. You couldn’t blame him—you were doing the same thing.

You made it home before the sun had set, for once. You had almost forgotten what your living looked like with sunlight streaking the walls. It was time for a step back, you thought. The Bots were your friends; but lately, they had sort of become your life, too. It was your job to make sure that you did more than just help other people, and it was your responsibility to take care of yourself. That included being boring and lazy.

You did your laundry. You made chicken soup from scratch and added strips of egg for noodles. You ate on the sofa, with a cartoon you’d seen a thousand times before playing in the background. Your phone stayed in the bedroom, charging under your bed so you weren’t checking it every other minute. When had simply relaxing started to feel like a luxury?

Around midnight, you woke up with your back killing you and the TV still on. When you stumbled into your bedroom, the notification light on your phone was blinking. Two emails from your boss, one from your mom’s work email.

Dammit. You flicked both of them open.

Someone had attempted to hack the company’s personnel files. It was unclear what had been compromised and what wasn’t, but you were encouraged to download a VPN just in case. Apparently, they had been looking for IP addresses.

You checked. Ratchet had already gotten you one. Dunk.

You skimmed the one from your mother. It didn’t sound like she was talking to you, so you just replied it’s me, mom, wrong address and let your phone drop back to the floor. You were too sleepy to eavesdrop on your mom’s work emails.

“I don’t think they actually read it,” said Dr. Commons.

“I mean, as scare tactics go, it was pretty weak,” said the low-level grunt who had actually composed the email. “People get hacked all the time.”

“We don’t want them to know it’s us, we just want them...” she flapped a hand. “Jumpy. Paranoid. Softened up, you know.”

“Sure, doc.” The grunt, who’s name was Simon, consulted the personnel file in his lap. “Dunno if it’ll work, though. Not unless we get aggressive.”

“The commander doesn’t want aggressive,” Dr. Commons said, and reviewed the sentence that had
just come out of her mouth. “In this instance. Yet.”

“Right. But the poking and the softening up just isn’t—I don’t think that’s how we get them.” Simon scratched the side of his head, thinking. “Like, you said we want the softened up, but I’m pretty sure they’re as soft as it gets. They’re a teddy bear. I think trying to work them further is just going to make them sharper.”

“Then we’re relentless!” Dr. Commons exclaimed, much too brightly. “We gaslight them!”

“Nah.” Simon flipped a few pages in the folder. “They’re pretty solid, mentally. The payoff just isn’t worth it. Besides, we run the risk of actually getting them angry, which seems bad right now.”

“Anger is malleable,” she pointed out.

Simon shook his head. “To a point. Look, read this. Their great-uncle’s funeral. They were nine at the time.”

Dr. Commons skimmed the page, blinked, and read it again. “Huh.”

“Yup. Mean right hook, too.” He shuffled the paper back into the folder, flipped it shut, and sighed. “Look, the boss is the boss. But I feel like if we push too much too fast, we’re either going to make them a threat to us or an asset to our enemies. We’re better off just waiting and killing them with the rest of the bunch. Some people, you just can’t fuck with.”

Dr. Commons sighed. “He’s not going to like this.”

“Yup.” Simon took a long swig of coffee and made a face.

Chapter End Notes

MECH: actually let's not
SILAS: what? Why?
MECH: they're too nice for us to scare OR recruit
“Take it slow,” Ratchet warned. “Your equilibrium will improve as you get used to walking around again.”

Bumblebee buzzed in reassurance, arms outstretched to steady him, high-wire style. Optimus stood back to give him space to move, eyes tracking every movement as though getting ready to catch him.

Raf had no such reservations. He nearly shoved past you, sprinting to Bee’s feet. “Bee! Bee, down here!”

Ratchet waved him away, tutting. “Move, go on! You can have your hugs once we’re sure you’re not going to get--”

Bee dropped to his knees and bent down to brush his forehead to the tip of Raf’s hair, beeping happily. Raf laughed breathlessly, reaching up to press his hands to Bee’s face. “I’m really glad you’re okay.”

Bee hummed in agreement, scooping him up.

“--Squished.” Ratchet finished, acerbically. “Don’t listen to me, sure. I’m just your primary health provider. What would I know?”

Optimus hummed something that, phonetically, sounded nothing like Ratchet, enough, but still managed to get it across. Ratchet grumped at him, arms crossed. “Very well, you’re free to go. Raf, make sure he gets back here for his afternoon check-in. Understood?”

“Okay,” Raf said amiably and returned his full attention to his friend. They walked off, Raf still cradled in Bee's hands, babbling excitedly to each other.

“Well,” Ratchet sighed. “That’s a good job done.” He turned to Optimus. “Alright, back on the berth.”

Optimus sat on the berth.

“Lay down.”

Optimus lay down.
“Primus. Sit back up, I need to plug you in.”

Optimus sat back up.

“Stop it,” Ratchet said. Optimus’ mouth quirked for a moment.

“Do you need me here for this—?” you asked.

Ratchet jumped. “Fraggit!”

“What?”

He blinked at you owlishly. “I forgot you were there.”

“...Oh-kay.” You had forgotten what it felt like to be the most mentally stable person in the room. Apparently, you had needed the ten hours you had slept last night. So did everyone else; except they still hadn’t gotten them. You felt vaguely powerful. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“Meh. You’re welcome to.” Ratchet picked up the tablet. “I’m just activating everything and checking for errors. You can ask him some questions in English if you absolutely must.”

“That not will have been not unnecessary,” Optimus assured you. His face soured.

You tried to parse the negatives. “...Okay.”

“Give him a minute,” Ratchet sighed, scanning the medbay. It looked better than it had with everything pulled out for the second room, but it was still kind of a nightmare. “Might as well do some inventory.”

“I can do inventory,” you corrected him. “When was the last time you slept?”

Optimus signed three past, flicking his fingers over his shoulder.


“I’m sorry, who’s the doctor here?” He flapped a hand at you dismissively.

“Me,” you said loftily. “I’m the Ratchet now. Stop touching my things. Stop doing that. Go get me a tool I won’t explain because your mind is tiny and squishy and it might break.”

“I have never said any of those things,” Ratchet said sharply. “Get out.”

You pointed at the door. “Bed. March.”

Ratchet glanced at Optimus. He raised an eyebrow. With a suitably disgusted sigh, Ratchet stormed off, shoulders already slumping.

“Wow.” Someone really was tired. You were blisteringly aware of how much authority you didn’t have in situations like this. It paid to have Optimus backing you up, apparently.

You glanced at him. “Thanks.”

“Thanking you,” Optimus said. He sighed deeply.

…

You looked up from your computer with a start. The medbay had fallen in calm, comfortable silence, as Optimus concentrated on his coding and you got caught up on work. It had been several hours, actually. You were starting to get a hair hungry. “No problem, really. I’m just glad you’re doing better.”

“I am.” Optimus stood fluidly. He looked decidedly more cheerful than you had seen him in—ever, actually. It was nice to see. “May I offer you a ride into town? I believe I am overdue for patrol.”

“Don’t push it,” you warned. “Ratchet’ll have both our heads for trophies if you wind up stranded in the desert somehow. Maybe just a turn around the block?” In rural Nevada, that was still a good long way.

“Agreeable. Your bike is still here, by the way. Perhaps we might drop it off?”

Jesus. You had completely forgotten. You really needed a new car. “Yeah, alright. You let someone else know we’re going, and I’ll meet you in the main room in ten.”

…

Your bike had been parked on the ramp for the better part of a week, from the look of it. It was dusty and spattered from people coming and going, and you were mildly certain Wheeljack had bumped it once or twice, but there was something good about the weathered grip of it under your hands. You were getting sentimental in your old age.

You wheeled it into the main room, content to wait for Optimus to show up in his own time.

Odd. Bumblebee was there, keying in what looked like coordinates in the console reserved for ground bridge trips. “Bee?” You kicked your kickstand down and left your bike by the wall, approaching warily. “What’s up, bud?”

He stilled, one hand still grasping the handle of the ground bridge controls. You could see each individual finger uncurl as he turned to you.

(Was there something wrong with the way he was standing?)

You stepped fully into the room, leaving your bicycle where it was. “Full disclosure, bud. Pretty sure Ratchet would have an aneurysm if you left the Jasper area right not. Did Optimus authorize this?” If he had, you weren’t waiting for Ratchet to have a talk with him. Leaving Bumblebee’s health aside, letting Bee go without telling folks was just asking for a barbershop quartet-style tantrum, when Ratchet, Raf, Arcee, and Fowler found out. There was emotional stress, and then there was poking beehives.

You relaxed as Bee finally left the ground bridge alone and stepped over to you. “Yeah. Sorry to be a downer. C’mon, let’s just go say bye to everyone real quick, and then maybe you and Raf can make a day of—”

(In the space between nanoseconds, the primordial, inexplicable part of your brain noticed something. Your sympathetic nervous system reacted without reacting, strings of organic data activating and updating themselves faster than thought. You would never really notice exactly how or when you realized; it would just come up in your stream of consciousness later, like a mathematical axiom you had taken for granted.

You had never once been afraid of Bumblebee.

On the day Bulkhead had sat on your pickup truck, Optimus had made the decision regarding which
of his soldiers would serve your first glimpse at the composed, organized face of the Autobot Forces. It had not taken long, but he had agonized over the situation nonetheless. Arcee was trained as an envoy—and calm and kind, more importantly—but she had been trained by Prowl, far from the quintessential people person. She was prepared to face off against political opponents and chessplayers, not shellshocked aliens. Bulkhead was, frankly, too flustered at the moment—better to let him panic in peace for a while, in hopes that he regain his composure in time for a better second impression. Ratchet—nope.

Bumblebee was not trained in diplomacy. He was, however, bright—cheerful in a way Optimus had never been. Bee was an extrovert, cheerful and gregarious, but intuitively softer and gentler with fragile things than he had any right to be. He was friendly.

You would never be told this, of course; but you did know it. Bumblebee was Bumblebee was Bumblebee—somethings didn’t need to be acknowledged to be true.

You had never been frightened of Bee. You had never been scared of Bumblebee.

Oh, your hindbrain realized, in the period of time between your next breath and the first brush of warm metal against your arm. I see.

This isn’t Bumblebee. )

Your teeth clacked painfully as unexpectedly warm metal wrapped around you and squeezed, lifting you terrifyingly fast. Past the taste of blood—had you bit your tongue? delightful—and the vice-like grip the majority of your body was caught in, you could just make out Bee’s eyes through the spots in your vision. He looked positively gleeful.

You whimpered, blood dribbling down your chin. Bee’s hand was growing slowly tighter, and you could feel muscles in your stomach spasming as they protested against the pressure. There was nowhere for you to go, just the slow, inescapable compress of unyielding fingers. Your head spun. Your brain was going haywire—certain things were dulled by adrenaline, but others were amplified, The low, mechanical hiss that came out of Bee’s mouth like low, thin laughter, a horrible awareness of the anatomy of the hand around you, like the imprint of the edges of Bee’s armor and the thin wiring underneath, blocked only by the weight of your own wrist against your thigh--

The world spun, changed directions, and spun again, as several thoughts interlocked and clicked into place like rows on a Rubiks cube.

Item the first: the main advantage of cargo pants was the ability to have small, satisfying items you never used on your person at all times.

Item the second: your right hand was trapped next to your thigh, with something thin and long and smooth on top of your fingers and something vaguely pen-shaped underneath.

Item the third: in a choice between a finger or two or a burst lung--

With some difficulty, you pressed the button. The spring-loaded penknife you had literally forgotten about for months sprang open, taking the fabric of your pocket, a little bit of thigh, and the wiring in Bee’s knuckle with it.

Bee’s fist opened reflexively with a roar of pained static. You managed to get an arm up and over the top of Bee’s fingers before you could drop twenty feet to the floor, gasping for breath. Spots clouded your vision. You could only barely make out a hazy view of the manic, furious look on Bee’s face.

You took a lungful of breath, looked whatever thing had messed with your boy right in the eye,
bared your teeth and **roared**.

Immediately, the sound of five separate engines simultaneously gunning from separate parts of the base echoed through the halls.

The thing in Bumblebee’s skin **glared** at you, pupils dark and ever so subtly uneven. It was a **mimic**, you realized vaguely as it raised its other hand to flick you off. Now that the secret of it had been revealed, there was no point in putting effort into the charade; and all that was left was cloying, sickly similarity.

In a breathless feat of pure self-preservation, you heaved yourself onto Bee’s wrist and **clung**, intent on staying **right the fuck there** until such time as you could make it to the floor with the minimal amount of spinal injuries. Bee’s hand shook once, twice, like you were a fly he was trying to dislodge. Your neck whipped in three different directions in quick succession. Your ears rung faintly. And then Bee’s entire body jolted as a **mass** barreled into it, nearly knocking you off entirely. Broad black fingers closed around Bee’s, scooping you up and caging around you in a single smooth disarming movement. From your perspective, the world swung, flipped briefly, and then spat you out on the floor as Optimus did his best to throw you as gently as possible away from the battle.

You appreciated the effort, but all in all, you still kissed the ground way harder than what was advisable. The first bounce caught you full in the ribs. You curled up instinctively on the second as pain rocketed through your entire torso, seething and vicious. Your vision went white for a second. Levering yourself to your hands and knees was a feat of will. When your head stopped pounding long enough for you to raise it, you looked up just in time to Optimus finally get Bee’s arm up and behind him, pressing him into a kneel. Optimus dipped his head to Bee’s, avoiding a few stray headbutts as the thing thrashed. His mask was down, and you could make out that he was speaking, too low to hear, something thin and ragged in his voice--

“Bee?” Raf said, from the door. Your heart dropped. “What’s--”

All at once Bee stilled, head canted towards the boy. One hand reached out. It was visibly shaking. Optimus kept his grip, wary.

You couldn’t see Bee’s face from this angle, but you could see Raf’s. You could even see how his chin was tipped up to look his friend in the eye, watch him step forward...

...Watch something confused and horrified slip into over his expression...

The first mechanical **click-click-wheeze** of transformation sounded deafening as you plunged your hand into your ruined pocket. Your fingers fumbled. For a second, you smelled the scent of sawdust and fake ketchup.

It wasn’t the clean **thuck** of your grandfather’s knife in a block of wood, but given the fact that you hadn’t practiced in literal years, you felt pretty good about the thin slice of energon that spattered to the floor. The thing **howled** as more energon dribbled between metal plates, as it tried to complete the transformation from arm to firearm. Raf stumbled back, out of the line of fire.

“**Get it on the damned floor,**” you shrieked, at the top of your voice. Optimus bore down, as Bulkhead and Arcee finally joined him, moving in sync to restrain him.

You didn’t stick around to watch. You hobbled to your feet and forced yourself across the room, snagging Raf by the sleeve. You didn’t let either of you stop until you had reached the medbay, and Bee’s tortured screams had faded somewhat.
You dropped to your knees, sickeningly aware that there was all kinds of wrong with your body at the moment. Your everything hurt. It wasn’t often you had the opportunity to say it, but you actually felt like you needed to go to a hospital.

When you glanced at Raf, there were broad, sticky tear stains on his face. He was shaking.

You pulled him in for a ginger hug, “Easy, bud.”

“No, I’m—” he pulled away, shoulders hitching in big, heaving sobs. “I-I-I’m so angry,” he gasped, breath stuttering in his chest. “I-I’m just—how dare—I just want hi—huhh—” He buried his face in your chest and screamed, fists curling and curling by his sides.

You looped an arm over his shoulders and let him rage. Your pain would come later.

Chapter End Notes

Reader: I should go to the hospital
Reader: ...in a sec
Eris

Chapter Summary

Once of the first dwarf planets discovered in the Kuiper Belt, after Pluto. Named for the Greek goddess of chaos, conflict and discord.

Chapter Notes

100k?? 100k

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the next few minutes, the base was a flurry of color and motion and sound. Sound was by far the worst.

You moved Raf into the room where Wheeljack had originally parked, wrapped him in blankets and headphones, and followed the sound of mechanical screaming. It just didn’t stop. At least with humans, you thought sourly, people had to breathe. When a robot screamed, they could do it as long as they wanted.

You stayed a good sixty feet back or so. It was taking a steady combination of Optimus and Arcee just to keep Not-Bee in one spot, let alone move him. Bulkhead acted as a spotter, an implacable shield between that thing and the rest of the base.

Then Ratchet stormed past, and things really got interesting.

You were reacting to an order to fetch stasis cuffs before you even realized you had heard it. Dimly, you registered that you should probably not be moving, given how bruised your everything felt, let alone ducking around a small forest of unsteady feet, scaling huge shelves and digging handcuffs out of them, and re-navigating the whole mess in order to get to the table where Ratchet was prepping sedatives, hands flying over the cartridges with unbelievable precision.

Ratchet grabbed the cuffs from you so fast it hurt your hands, pressed the sedative cartridges into them, and snatched Bumblebee’s wrists out of midair one after the other with the same hand. He snapped the cuffs on.

Immediately, Bee went limp.

In the absence of struggling that followed, movement registered out of the corner of your eye. Miko was cupped in Wheeljack’s hands in the doorway, eyes wide as saucers.

Fuck.

You skirted around the group, ignoring whatever they were talking about, and kicked Wheeljack in the ankle. “You two, out. Take Miko and check on Raf, he’s inconsolable. I’m gonna make sure Jack’s not on site.”
Wheeljack raised a dubious eyebrow, but nodded wordlessly, turning on his heel with one last glance into the medbay. Miko didn’t argue, but as Wheeljack turned you look up just in time to see her staring at you rather than the unconscious, possessed body of one of her friends.

Great.

…

Jack was out of town with June, doing whatever it was Jack and June did when they were out of town. Fowler was on his way from New Mexico, although he didn’t have an ETA.

You kept moving. You found something to do, one thing after another. You didn’t think about the fact that this was the third crisis you had dealt with in under a week. You didn’t think about the fact that your favorite sweater had blood on it.

You weren’t actually sure how bad your injuries were. The answer was somewhere between ‘ow’ and ‘not bad enough to force you to stop walking around’, but given your pain tolerance, that could mean anything. For all you knew, your lungs could be filling with blood right that minute.

You kept moving anyway. As long as there was stuff to do, there needed to be someone to do it.

…

“Why,” said Optimus, slowly. “Are they still here?”

You blinked, stopping in the doorway so abruptly your shoes nearly squeaked. Optimus was staring at you with some new, equally unidentifiable look on his face. You realized with a jolt that he hadn’t actually seen you since you had stumbled your way out of the danger zone in the main room. Whatever was going on with his face right now made you want to turn around and head back to the hangar room.

Ratchet glanced at you, bewilderment turning to suspicion as he took in your appearance. You still hadn’t wiped away the blood on your chin, you realized abruptly. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

You took a step back. “I--”

“They were grabbed,” Optimus said shortly. “It was a wonder they weren’t crushed to death.”

Arcee cursed sharply, standing up from her place by the wall. Ratchet whirled around, eyes snapping to yours. “Is this true?!”

“Uhh--” Bulkhead made as if to put a hand on his shoulder. Ratchet caught his hand in midair and flicked it away, still glaring at you. He back off, eyes flicking to you guiltily.

Your throat closed up. This wasn’t the reaction you had anticipated. You had survived. You had faced off against one of the most objectively dangerous beings on the planet and made it out the other side. You didn’t deserve to be scolded for—whatever was going on here. “Stop shouting,” you said, as clearly as possible. “I left the medbay earlier to deal with my bike, and--”

Ratchet advanced on you in two great strides, leaning down to loom directly over you. “Is. This. True?!”

“Stop it,” you snarled without thinking. The sheer size of him was getting to you. You could feel the shadow of the taste of blood filling your mouth and the nauseating smell of almost-metal, like alien pennies.
Something in your face seemed to connect with Ratchet. He sat back up, out of your space, and your breathing evened out in one huge, shaky breath, like a dropped manhole cover. For a moment, he just looked at you. You couldn’t read his expression beyond the fact that it made you feel like you had failed miserably.

Everyone was looking at you.

Ratchet’s face curdled back into the same crabby scowl he always wore. There was a hard edge to it, now.

He stood up abruptly. “Someone take it to the nearest clinic immediately. The GPS coordinates have been transmitted over general comms.”

“I’ll--” said Arcee and Bulkhead, nearly at the same time.

“I will take you,” Optimus told you, calmly. He nodded at Arcee. She paced off without a backwards glance, back stiff. “Bulkhead, you are to guard the medbay. Keep the children out and the patient where Ratchet needs him.”

“Yeah, boss,” Bulkhead said uneasily. He shot you a weary look on his way out the door. You repressed the inexplicable urge to call him back.

Optimus transformed where he was and swung open a door, letting you approach him. “In.”

It wasn’t a request.

…

Dimly, you realized Optimus was taking you the same route the two of you had taken Vince to get medical attention, over a month ago. The thought wasn’t much comfort.

The ride was a long, silent one. You could feel the tension humming in the air. Once or twice, you thought about speaking. Each time, fresh flakes of blood fluttered on to your sweater. Gross. You held as still as possible.

Your head hurt. With a start, you realized you had been clenching your jaw. You winced, feeling the sore muscle. You could feel the dried tracks where blood had collected on the underside of your throat.

“Are you well?”

You jumped. You hadn’t expected Optimus would have much to say to you. “Yeah. I—yeah.”

“ Hmm.” You thought you heard the high-pitched sound of the scanner, but it was difficult to tell through the constant rumble of the engine.

You closed your eyes, struggling for words. You suddenly felt desperate to explain yourself, like a little kid called in front of a principal. You didn’t even feel like you had done anything wrong, you just wanted people to calm down. You were scared, and tired, and not at all equipped to be yelled at. You just wanted a hug.

“Optimus,” you managed. “I--”

“Please,” Optimus interrupted. You blinked, shocked. Optimus never interrupted people. He just didn’t. “Save what you have to say once you have consulted the doctor. I do not trust myself to
speak civilly at the moment.”

Your jaw clamped shut in a fresh wave of pain. In front of you, the road stretched onwards. Above you, the stars stretched upwards.

You wrapped your arms around yourself and closed your eyes, waiting for whatever came next.

…

“Any temperature differences?” the nurse asked you, patiently. “Too cold, too hot?”

You shook your head dully. There had been a whole slew of questions about blood circulation and pain and 1-10 scales, but you had stopped paying attention. They had you hooked up to a machine that would beep if it detected heart arrhythmia, and every so often someone would come and poke your torso to check for swelling or internal bleeding or one of the seventy other horrible things were apparently at risk for. You were on your seventh cup of water. People kept handing them to you.

You were lucky, they said. Judging by the way your torso looked like you were wearing a mottled purple and red shirt, if things had been much worse, they would have been worse all over.

Even the lucky version wasn’t great, though. Hence the machines. Hence the questions, and the fact that you were stuck in a hospital bed overnight.

The nurse—a kind woman names Janet—hadn’t so much a batted an eyelash when you told her it was a hiking accident. You were absolutely certain that she could smell the bullshit coming off you in waves, but apparently, interrogations would wait until you looked less like a puppy someone had stepped on.

You wished that they hadn’t had to cut you out of your sweater to keep you from raising your arms. You wished you could put a shirt back on, and that the various doctors and such that kept coming in would glance at your chart to see your pronouns before they addressed you, not just after Janet surreptitiously pointed. You really, really wished there was a way you could head this off before the entire township of Jasper decided you were dying.

More than anything, though, you just wished you had something to do. Staring off into space and adding subject after subject to the list of things you didn’t want to think about right now was getting old fast.

Janet had asked you a question you couldn’t answer with a yes or a no. Reluctantly, you turned your brain back on. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I asked if you knew a June Darby?” Janet shrugged. “It’s a long shot, but she talks about someone with your name from time to time—”

“She’s my next-door neighbor,” you said blankly. “So, like. Probably?”

You and Janet stared at each other for a long, awkward moment.

“Cool,” you said. “Please don’t tell her I’m here. She’d freak.”

“No, yeah, you’ve got total confidentiality,” Janet assured you. “You’re—”

There was a knock at the door. The one and only June Darby popped her head in. “Janet? Can you come deal with—shit!”
Yup. That tracked.

Janet whirled around with a startled shriek. “I thought you had tonight off!”

“I had to swap with Marco--” She stepped fully into the room, eyes on you. “What happened?”

“How hiking accident,” you said, trying to speed-run the five stages of grief as you mourned any chance of minimizing today’s drama. “The mountain looks worse, don’t worry.”

The thin scowl threaten- ing on June’s face warned you that she was going to be a lot more nosy than Janet was. Sensing this, Janet scooted in between her and you, holding her hands out like she was worried June might pounce. “Easy. Can you deal?”

June took several deep breaths. When she looked up, her eyes looked suspiciously red. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay.” Janet seemed to relax. “I’ll page Dr. Henderson, and you go get some coffee and cool it.”

June patted her on the arm, eyes still on you. You smiled, trying to look less dejected than you felt. “I’m fine, I promise. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” June said roughly, and left. Her hands were clenched into fists.

You briefly considered all the ways that could affect the level of interest June would have in the Unspoken Thing the two of you had been uneasily avoiding, and added it to the list.

…

Outside, June leaned against the door, eyes closed. Her thoughts were whirling.

With a groan, she dug out her cell phone and looked down at it, willing her eyes to focus. She hadn’t been getting enough sleep lately.

Sure enough, there was a text from Jack, wondering where she was. There was also a text from someone else, wondering roughly the same thing.

She tapped out two different responses, checked to make sure they were each to the right people, and pressed send.

…

Jack’s phone beeped. He glanced at the notification, and relaxed with a sigh. The last thing he needed was more people in his social circle getting in over their head.

Chapter End Notes

Before June walked into the examination room, there was a comical shift-long sequence where Janet left the room just as June walked in and June turned to talk to someone just as Janet walked past, etc. No one noticed, except a seven-year-old girl who was waiting to get her broken arm X-rayed, and who was much cheered by it. One day, the girl would grow up to become a famous comedian and human rights activist. That memory would inspire one of her most popular bits.
Fomalhaut

Chapter Summary

A star located in Pisces. The orbit of its single satellite (zombie planet Fomalhaut b) through the lingering debris gives the star the appearance of a large eye ringed with fire, a la Sauron from the Lord of the Rings. The audience is strongly encouraged to track down false-color composite images of the star for the full effect; in red, if available.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to Jackass, folks

You turned the body over, hands flying on instinct, scrabbling at their wrist and neck in search of a pulse.

Wait.

There was a figure lying on the ground, gleaming so brightly it hurt to look at them. Were they gleaming? Were they glowing? They looked dead.

Wait.

You were in an enormous domed room with walls that arched gracefully into a ceiling that shone with the faint shadows of stars. You didn’t recognize the constellations. It was difficult to shake the feeling that you had wandered onto a stage; that everything was there not because it was real, but because it set the scene for a story. A story, you suspected, that you were not supposed to be apart of. Where was that light coming from?

Wait.

Your eyes felt crusty and weak and dry, as though you had been crying. Reluctantly, you opened them.

Wait--

You gagged, doubling over as something cold and metal and liquid tried to force its way up your throat. You grit your teeth, head swimming, and focused on--

(Your eyes flickered over the stars painted into the ceiling like pockmarks. You weren’t sure if you trusted them.)

--Your family. You thought about hand-me-down flannels and the crystalline anticipation of scanning an airport crowd for a familiar face. You thought about unspeakably boring fishing trips and the stories that made them worth it. You thought about heelies and stargazing and languages that sounded like music. You thought about a diner that was lonely on the outside and bright and full
of laughter on the inside. You thought about too many blankets.

When you opened your eyes, you were on the ground. You were yourself. You wondered why you felt so terribly relieved about that.

You sat up. The figure was still next to you, blocking out an entire half of your vision with its sheer luminescence. You wrinkled your nose, poking them gently. They didn’t stir.

You pulled out the sunglasses you never used. They didn’t do much, but it was better than nothing. When you went to rest your hand on their shoulder you could feel deep, concave grooves, like scars. It felt as though something had taken carpenter’s tools and just—scraped.


The figure opened their eyes blearily. They didn’t have pupils, but they were definitely looking at you.

On impulse, you slid one palm over the other and brought your hands together, index fingers extended. It’s nice to meet you.

The figure reached out, arm shaking. You met their hand halfway, tensing as they gripped your hand with surprising force. If you wanted to pull away, you had a bad feeling that you were going to have to leave the hand behind to do it.

Infinitely gently, they found your palm and finger-spelled something into it. It took you a minute—your comprehension was poor at best. H-U-R-T-S. H-U-R-T-S. H-U-R-T-S.

“Oh,” you whispered. “Okay.” You curled your fingers around theirs. Their grip on your hand loosened, falling away.

You bit your lip, wishing your vocabulary was better. H-U-G, you signed. You tried to arrange your face into the ‘eye-brows up’ position, but you were pretty sure the interrogative was lost on them.

They blinked uncomprehendingly. Yup. You were lucky they understood ASL at all. American Sign Language was called American for a reason—sign languages were completely different around the world, even in countries that spoke English. There was British Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, Lengua de Señas Mexicana, Langue des Signes Française--

(...wait a minute. Did this remind you of something?)

Slowly, in case they needed to pull away, you gathered the figure into your arms and wrapped your arms over them. Their skin felt cool and metallic.

They blinked once, twice, eyes fluttering shut. They snuggled into you like a trusting child.

You stayed there for a very long time.

The darkness was all and everywhere and anything that ever was, and you hated it. You screamed, anger and confusion and hurt pouring out of your mouth as though you could force it into a shield to keep the nothing at bay. As though by being something, you could avoid becoming everything.

 Darkness pressed at your ears and your throat. You screamed again, scared and hurt and outraged. It seeped farther down your esophagus.
You wanted to take a deep breath. You wanted to calm down and center yourself and figure out how to get out of this, the way you had a thousand times before. This time, though, you could feel it every time you gasped for air, clinging and cloying and awful. You didn’t want this to be a part of you. You didn’t want this near you!

(You didn’t want to be a part of this.)

...Oh.

A mathematical proof popped into your head—the mathematical proof, the simplest, most vital one of all. If A equals B and B equals C, then A must equal C. A vertebrae on the backbone of Algebra. The blood cells of Trigonometry. If a set of everything included all things, literally, and the darkness was everything--

Then you were the darkness, too.

...More importantly, you realized, with the sharp snap of epiphany, the darkness was you.

You felt the weight of a sweater that had been worn a year or two longer than it should have been, soft and comforting. You could feel a crack in your lip from the dry desert air.

You were the single least threatening person you had ever met. Why should you be scared now?

Your feet met floor. Your head ached as gravity reasserted itself, forcing you to steady yourself on what felt like a nearby table. When you looked around, you were in your kitchen. The microwave light was on, showcasing—you sniffed the air experimentally—a bowl of chicken soup, slowly turning.

You turned in a circle. You surveyed the broken table, the shattered counter-tops, the way the glass panes in the oven had warped and melted like cheese. If the microwave was plugged into anything, you sure couldn’t see it.

“Alright,” you said aloud. “Who trashed my house?”

The chicken soup was still turning. The timer display was buzzing alarmingly rather than providing you with any actual information, so you decided to leave it alone for a while.

You poked your head into the living room. Your sofa had been cut cleanly in half, stuffing strewn around the room like Christmas lights. A single strand of what appeared to be meat hung from your ceiling fan, which was slowly turning. Your windows were all shattered, except for one, which had been painted a bright, sickly blue.

Hmm.

When you turned back to the kitchen, there was a figure crouched in the remains of your refrigerator.

“What the fu--?”

It pounced.

Your head bounced painfully off the wall as its weight knocked you over, one dribbling black hand scrabbling at your throat. You got hold of its wrists and pushed up, forcing it back and off you. To your surprise, you were much stronger than it.
It hissed and spat, bubbling darkness dripping from its mouth. It pulsed and shifted, and when you looked again, it had your grandmother’s face.

“What the fuck,” you told it, and punched it.

Its head snapped back. When it looked up again, it looked like Fowler. The Fowler face gargled at you.

You slapped it. Miko, grinning at you and drooling.

Bam. Your roommate from college, lipstick smeared and dark.

...You poked it.

Your own face, contorted into a rictus of fear.

Okay.

You stood up, bringing it with you. It clawed and scrabbled at your arms, face melting into something between yours and June’s. You flipped it around so that you could hold it like a kitten.

“Would you take it easy? I--” you ducked under a clawed strike. “Yup, yup. I did hit you, I deserved that. I do kinda need you to calm down, though. Does that sound good?”


You set them down as gently as possible. They immediately climbed the walls, neck twisting obscenely so that they could keep hissing at you. “You remind me of this kid I know,” you told them. “Her name’s Miko. She’d either try to keep you as a pet or hunt you for sport, so I’d steer clear of her. Are you hungry?”

They snarled, spattering ooze onto the ruin of your floor.

“Okay.” You checked the microwave. The display seemed to have fixed itself; however, it was counting up instead of down. “Well, we’ll give that another minute, I guess.”

You turned back to the figure. They were directly behind you. In the time your back was turned, they had grown tall and gnarled, misshapen in a way that suggested something that had continued growing long after it had been meant to, like some wizened tree. The top of their head scraped the ceiling.

You looked them up and down. Yup. Miko would definitely take this as a direct and personal challenge. “I’ll take that as a yes. If you can find a good chair, I’ll bring the soup over when it’s done.”

You went to move around it, going for the drawer where you kept the utensils. To your surprise, it flinched, as though it was expecting another blow.

Your stomach curdled in guilt. You felt about six inches tall. “I’m...I’m really not going to hurt you. I promise.”

It stared at you.


It tilted its head. You thought you saw their fists clench open and shut uneasily.
You sighed, spreading your arms and waited.

The figure stepped into them. When you went to put your arms over them, they were no bigger than a child. You knelt, letting them rest their weight on you. They were shaking.

You stayed like that for a very long time.

…

You woke up tired, but to the news that if you were going to die, you would have done it already. That was enough to cheer anyone up. Breakfast consisted of green beans, ????(unidentifiable), and Jello, all of which were brought up to you by June before her afternoon shift. She and Janet were obviously friends. You spent an hour or so basking in the fact that one of your favorite people was being appreciated by her coworkers.

Around eleven, Janet popped her head in just as the doctor was going through the exercise you were supposed to do to help your ribs. “Excuse me—someone’s here to pick you up. Name of…” she consulted the clipboard. “Ratchet and Bulkhead Audobon? Brothers?”

You burst into startled laughter and immediately regretted it. Your torso spasmed uncomfortably. “Ow, fuck.”

Dr. Lewis tutted at you sympathetically. “You might want to hold off on the comedy shows for a while.”

“Ugh. Yeah. Describe them?”

Janet looked cagey.

“Do they kind of look like if ravioli was a person?” you suggested.

Her lips quirked. “I wasn’t going to say.”

Best to get whatever was waiting for you downstairs over with. “Tell them I’ll be down in--” you glanced at the doctor.

“As soon as we get the wheelchair,” he said.

“As soon as we get the wheel--” you stopped. “The what now?”

“It’s an insurance thing,” Dr. Lewis and Janet said at the same time.

“Cute. I don’t suppose it’s negotiable?”

“Nope,” said Dr. Lewis at the same time as Janet said, “It’s not, trust me.” They looked at each other and shared a smile.

Great. There went your last hope of not making a scene in the middle of the hospital lobby like some sort of daytime soap opera,

You levered yourself to your feet, using the handrails. “Let’s get this circus over with.” Maybe Ratchet would keep everything calm, you thought optimistically. He was a doctor. He had to be used to these things.

…
Judging by the way shouting was already echoing through the halls as soon as you got off the elevator, Ratchet was not keeping anything or anyone calm in the slightest, including himself. Whether or not he had been calm in the first place was a matter of conjecture, given that Bulkhead’s holoform had an arm looped firmly through his when you rounded the corner. The receptionist, a kind, clean-looking man in his thirties, looked like he was considering climbing over the desk and generating some revenue for the hospital.

They hadn’t seen you yet. You looked down at yourself. You were wearing a tank top in place of your usual sweater, showcasing the deep, vivid bruising on your arms and torso. You looked smaller, without the extra layers, you thought.

“You’re sure I’m not allowed to walk?” you asked Janet.

“Nope.”

“Pop a wheelie, maybe? Do some sick spins?”

“As rad as that would be, hard no to both. If you wanted to make an entrance, you should have asked for sparklers on the wheels when you had a chance.”

You giggled weakly, trying not to wince too much. Having a bruised everything was going to be a laugh and half, you could just tell.

The shouting cut off abruptly. Ho boy.

“Hey,” you said, lamely.

Ratchet and Bulkhead were both looking at your arms as though the exact time and date of your death had been tattooed on your elbows. Great.

The receptionist sat back, content that emotional karma was doing the job for him. “I’ve got some paperwork to fill out real quick, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“No worries.” You scanned the insurance form and signed. You’d have to make some calls later, but there was nothing that you had to address right now. “Ambulance fee? I didn’t come here in an ambulance.”

“That’ll be waived.” He took the form back and crossed it out. “I suggest waiting a bit, but not too long. The finances take a bit to be processed properly.”

Ratchet opened his doughy mouth. Across the room, a little girl started whispering audibly to her brother that that man over there doesn’t have teeth, I told you! He closed it, looking faintly embarrassed.

“Okay.” You tipped your head back to see Janet. “Are we good?”

“Hang on.” She wheeled you through the door. “Now we’re good.”

You started to stand up. Janet waved you back. You relaxed with a groan that was only partially theatrical. “Would one of you bring your vehicle around to the entrance, please?”

“Oh, sure,” Bulkhead said, sounding startled, and started to walk off. As soon as he passed behind a tree, the holoform vanished and reappeared behind his windshield. In the passenger seat.

You did your level best not to laugh or cry or just die of second-hand embarrassment as Bulkhead
pretended to drive himself over. Ratchet looked vaguely purple.


…

As far as horrible drives went, this one wasn’t bad. The drive to your great-uncle’s funeral had certainly been worse, even if the journey back hadn’t been bad. The drive to the dean’s office from your dorm, on one particular day. The commute to your first day of seventh grade.

The drive back home from the hospital was not very high on your list of horrible drives, but it was still very firmly on the list.

Bulkhead and Ratchet kept quiet, staring straight ahead. Since they were holoforms, that meant that there were basically two very ugly mannequins in the car with you. No breathing, no shifting weight, just dead-eyed staring straight ahead. Occasionally, one of them would turn their necks slightly to look at you in the mirror in a way that you could only assume was meant to be subtle. It wasn’t.

Outside, dust and dry grass zoomed past in hypnotic wave after hypnotic wave. Behind Bulkhead, Ratchet was almost tailgating, keeping within range.

About fifteen minutes out from the hospital, you cleared your throat. “I’m—I’m really okay. The wheelchair was standard protocol, I guess. I can walk fine.”

“I know,” Ratchet said stiffly.

“I didn’t mean to worry anyone,” you felt like you needed to add. “Honestly. I just wanted to help, I didn’t think—

mph.

Bulkhead’s holoform had teleported from the front seat to the back in order to pull you into a hug. The holoform had significantly more mass than you did, so despite the fact that it was room temperature and smelled disturbingly of hotdogs, it was a pretty good hug. You returned it as well as you could, as something in your chest abruptly unclenched.

“Bulkhead,” Ratchet snapped past gritted teeth he did not, according to popular rumor, have. “We are supposed to be giving them space.”

“Oh,” said Bulkhead, pulling back. His voice was coming from the car speakers, not the holoform. “Right, uh. Sorry.”

“Is that why you’re acting weird?” you asked incredulously. “I don’t want space. I was just nearly squished by someone wearing one of my best friend’s skin—”

“Exactly,” Ratchet said. “Physical restraint is only going to make things worse if it's not reintroduced slowly—”

Bulkhead’s holoform squished itself away from you, horrified. You felt like you were going to scream.

“I want,” you said, loudly and clearly. “A hug. Yesterday was awful. I was nearly killed, and then I got yelled at, and then I had to go the stupid hospital. I don’t need space, I need to know that Bee’s gonna be okay. I need to know what the next step is. And I really, really need—” your throat closed up. I need to know that people aren’t mad at me still.

Bulkhead’s holoform scooted back over and opened its arms. You leaned against it with a tired sigh,
ignoring the pull of damaged muscle.

A weird, doughy hand rested itself on your knee. You grabbed it, shooting Ratchet a tired smile. His face softened, which only looked a little bit like it was melting.

For the first time in twenty-four hours, as the base loomed closer in the distance, you felt like you were ready for what was coming.

Chapter End Notes

The Audience: why didn't they get a hug
Bulkhead: ON IT
Planisphere

Chapter Summary

A tool used to determine the appearance of the night sky at a certain latitude on any given time and day. A layer of partially shaded plastic pinned to a star map simulates the visible night sky, and the date matched with the time informs the position one must turn the sheet to show an accurate representation of the sky.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Sorry for the impromptu hiatus, folks. Those’re probably going to be something we just have to put up going forward. Still, this story forges on with a chapter that's a good three times the normal length, so. have fun with that?
The next chapter will kind of be the end of Part I. This information doesn't really affect anything, other than maybe being a progress update--there are at least two more parts until the end of the present outline, and the outline does not cover everything.
Also!!! Kyro909 posted some delightful fan art of the Reader Character, and also some lovely visuals of general goofiness in the comments! Check it out over here:
https://kyro909.tumblr.com/day/2019/09/22
https://kyro909.tumblr.com/day/2019/09/25

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something was different about Jasper.

In college, you had spent a lot of your time in places where there should have been a lot of people, but weren’t. It wasn’t a huge campus, but somehow, you always wound up sitting in echoing, abandoned lecture halls or classrooms that were rumored to be haunted or even just alone in the halls late at night, trying to figure out if this was the staircase out of the basement level or if that was. You hadn’t sought those places out—in fact, you had spent a lot of college being lonely as a result. You liked being around people. You needed to be around people, at least a little bit. That didn’t keep you from winding up alone, over and over.

Empty rooms that should have been filled with people were a familiar sensation. You remembered the kind of noises you could only here without the sound of another person breathing, the feeling of being acknowledged by things you couldn’t see. You knew what it was like to almost feel the press of a crowd around you until you looked up from your phone and realized that you were the only person in sight.

You stargazed. Loneliness didn’t bother you so much anymore, but it did occasionally fascinate you.

Liminal spaces were for the middle of a cornfield or an empty subway station or an unoccupied house. There was no fucking way there should have been one in the middle of Jasper’s main thoroughfare—especially when you could see the people. It was like--

(Like noticing for the first time that you could see a person’s bones through their skin. Like there was
something spongy and pale and terrifyingly vital roiling just under the surface, just close enough for
you to see. Close enough to see you right back.)

--Like two stars of differing magnitudes had switched places. There was an infinitesimal shift,
something so small that noticing it out loud would have been embarrassing; but...incorrect. A spelling
error in the air.

You knocked gently on the window. “Can you pull over for a second? I’ll be quick.”

Bulkhead swerved easily to the side of the road, materializing his holoform to join you outside. He
had to help you slide out of the backseat when your torso muscles refused to obey.

The street was...the street. You had driven it dozens of times, with the Autobots and without them,
and all of three things had changed in all that time. There was the decrepit gas station, manned by
Ray with his usual copy of *Moby Dick* with the cover of an early 90s edition of *Cosmopolitan* taped
over the outside. There was a small array of unoccupied buildings with rusty roofs and fresh potted
plants in the window—probably plastic, maybe not. Down a good ways was the sign of Wen’s
Diner, lit but hard to make out in the brightness of the midday desert. If you looked the other way,
you could see the turn-offs for the residential neighborhoods, the outside corner of K.O. Burgers, and
then a hazy horizon, interrupted by mesas and the odd tall weed. If you walked a little that way, you
could see down the street that held the school, the warehouse-turned-church-turned-vague municipal
building, and the little white church, barely taller than the houses.

It was the same town you had fallen in love with, months and months ago. If you concentrated, you
could see signs of the auspicious mining town Jasper had once been—a rickety wooden building
over there that used to be a barroom, the stone foundation of burned-down building cutting between
two yards, the base of a statue that had long since been removed at what Jasper had where other
towns had a central square.

None of this was new. None of this told you what you wanted to know. You shook your head,
frustrated, and realized that you had just been...staring into the middle distance for a good minute and
a half. Bulkhead looked like he was ready to shoo you back into the backseat and turn around for the
hospital.

“Does Jasper look different today?” you asked him.

Bulkhead’s holoform scanned the horizon briefly. “No. I mean, a little bit bigger, maybe, but I’m
pretty sure that’s a ‘me’ problem. Is it supposed to?”

“I don’t know, you said. You had no idea how to articulate the feeling of *I feel like something’s
supposed to be wrong and the fact that it’s not is bad or I feel like I just realized something with dire
consequences but I don’t know what* without prompting an overreaction, and so you didn’t. You
lived here. You would have plenty of time to figure out what details about Jasper were wrong once
no one was possessed and everyone was fine.

...Something about that seemed wrong. You leaned against Bulkhead’s door, chewing your lip. You
felt a headache coming on.

Ratchet’s holoform stalked over. “The less time we spend out in the open, the better. Do we have a
problem?”

“No. I...no.” Your rubbed your forehead. “I don’t think so.”

Ratchet frowned at you, leaning closer in a way that might have been subtle if you weren’t ever-so-
slightly terrified of his face. You leaned back, eyeing him.

“If you’re experiencing symptoms,” he began.

“I’m not.” You crossed your arms. “I’ve got a clean bill of health. Once the bruising clears up and all my organs return to the color they’re supposed to be—”

That was it. You stumbled over the end of the sentence and stood up, scanning the area.

The color of the metal was wrong. Or rather, the town was old, but its metal was not. Every lock, doorknob, and knocker gleamed like they had been scrubbed yesterday, even the ones on the unoccupied buildings. The wood slats on some of the older buildings were...surprisingly fresh, too, like they’d been preserved. Ancient finish or weatherproofing or whatever was now turning faintly greyish-purple.

And speaking of, there were too many houses! Whole rows of them, all standing empty and cold, too old to be the product of some ill-fated development gambit and too neat and regular to have been original buildings. What sort of mining town built houses exactly the same? What real estate company made houses that looked older than they were in a town like Jasper?

Your eyes stuttered. The roads that intersected the main road were all curved, framing the tiny church on one side and an open, largely unacknowledged field behind the gas station on the other. Jasper, smack in the middle of big sky country with no land barriers to speak of, had been built in the shape of a giant, asymmetrical circular design. You closed your eyes, trying to picture the town from above. Was it an infinity symbol? A clover? Some sort of badge shape, maybe?

Some brushed your arm. Your ears rushed, and Ratchet’s voice popped into focus. “--’re not going to listen, then perhaps I’ll just shut up! No one seems to care about their own health around here anyway--”

Your eyes refocused. Bulkhead’s holoform had a hand on your arm, looking uncertain—you hadn’t even noticed him get close. Ratchet was in the wrong place, too, like he’d been pacing around.

“Oof.” you leaned into Bulkhead’s steadying hold on your arm, fighting off a wave of disorientation. There wasn’t have any vertigo, but the sense of disorientation was nearly as overpowering. You felt like you had heard someone call your name in a crowd, only to look around and realize everyone in sight was ignoring you. But if it was the loudspeakers. And if the crowd was all dressed formally and you were in your pajamas.

You…

...should probably listen to the trained doctor yelling in your face. Ratchet was a jackass, but he was an intelligent jackass who genuinely had your best interests at heart. You were displaying real, tangible reasons to be concerned for your health after a traumatic event. The smart thing was to take it easy, handle what needed to be handled, and keep someone around to drive you back to the hospital if it got worse. “Yeah. Sorry, guys. I’m not trying to worry you.”

Ratchet cut off the middle of his tirade to give you a severely dirty look. “You just got out of the hospital. You don’t need to try to do anything. Get back in Bulkhead and try not to get worse, and we’ll call it even. If you can go for the rest of the day without endangering yourself, I’ll give you a sticker.”

Cute. You let Bulkhead help you into the backseat, holding on to your arm like a princess. He did a pretty bang-up job of imitating how Janet had helped you at the hospital, actually. If you were in
danger of falling and not just making a point of following professional advice to the letter, you would have been in safe hands.

... "Something’s wrong."

Bulkhead slowed. You twisted in your seat to look back at Ratchet on the road behind you. He looked fine, driving right along the same way he had since you had passed out of Jasper and turned onto the road that led to the base. The lack of immediately visible danger was not reassuring.

“What is?” Bulkhead asked. His holoform turned mechanically to give you a shrug. He was kind of over-emoting with the thing, but you weren’t going to spoil his fun.

“I don’t know,” Ratchet insisted over the radio. “Something.”

“Yeah, that’s going around this morning,” Bulkhead muttered. “Because of the periodic pings?”

“Hrrm. There must be some variable at work that they can’t express over comms. The sooner we get back to base, the better.”

“Periodic pings?” you asked.

“It’s a different mode of comms than what we normally use,” Bulkhead said. “Harder to track. Mission head sends the simplest ping possible, like a one or a zero. We send one back. It’s the equivalent of grunting through a wall at each other, so it’s not gonna get any love letter back and forth, but it’s a good way to let someone know you’re alive.”

“The base has been sending you those instead of regular comms?”

“Yeah. It’s better than them going silent, but it might mean that ol’ Megs managed to use Bee’s chassis to do some actual damage to the comms system. That’s no good. Other than, y’know, we’re kinda superstitious about it. Last time it happened, I had to bring you in.”

A lot was going on there. “It’s really him, then,” you murmured. “Megatron’s got Bee? The one Optimus was fighting when I saw them when I was stargazing?”

“Uh, yeah, actually. Frag, I always forget about that.” Bulkhead’s holoform went eerily still, considering the windshield blankly. “Yeah. Congrats on surviving a fight with a mech who’s killed more people than any other person in Cybertronian history, by the way.”

You rode in silence for a little while.

“I wasn’t being sarcastic,” Bulkhead muttered eventually. “If, uh, that’s how it sounded. Slag’s impressive. S’more than a lot of Autobots managed.”

You sighed. “Bulkhead?”

“...Yeah?”

“You’re one of my best friends. I truly enjoy your company. That being said, if you don’t either stop or talk about something else, I’m gonna hit you.”

“Got it, boss.”...
The main room was empty, thank god. You had no idea what you would have done if everyone was waiting around clapping or whatever, other than maybe blush or hide your face in your hands or die. Ratchet set you down next to your usual spot on the console table, watching you settle in with a vaguely satisfied huff. He liked everything in its place, and apparently, that included you. He bustled off to the medbay, following the vague screechy echoes that were the sounds of his possessed patient. After a few minutes of awkwardness, Bulkhead’s desire to not have to sit around watching you type overrode his wish to make sure you didn’t fall off the console and die, and he bustled off to check on Wheeljack and the kids. Then, you were alone.

You sighed in relief. You had barely recharged your social batteries in weeks. You were just tired as a default, it felt like; and the ache in your ribs/stomach/arms/shoulders/etc. wasn’t helping. Eventually, you knew, you would either adjust or go crazy. The likelihood of either varied from day to day.

After a few minutes of blessedly uneventful silence, something large scuffed in the shadows. Your hand was at your untorn thigh pocket before you even realized you had heard something. You tucked your penknife securely into your hand before you called out, “If you’re possessed by a Decepticon, I must warn you that I’m inadequately armed and unwilling to die. The resulting fight would be embarrassing for the both of us.”

A tall, thin shadow shifted, hesitated, and stepped into the light.

It was a figure like a black stone monument, all acute angles and blank grey planes. Long arms that would have been gorilla-like if they weren’t so flat and spindly swayed by their sides as they moved, the greatest point of motion in their entire gait. It took a moment for your brain to interpret their head—because there was no face, mainly, just a blank screen. You couldn’t tell if they were looking at you. You didn’t know if that mattered or not.

You watched them, trying to decide if you should be scared. Your experience with Decepticons was...vivid, but it wasn’t as though you had a ton of data to go off of. There was the dim figure you’d spotted in the distance in August—Megatron, Knock Out that time Bulkhead had sat on your car, Knock Out the time you had gone with Optimus to help bail out Vince, and possessed Bee and his desire to toothpaste-tube your insides just yesterday. The common identifier between all four of your encounters with them was that the Decepticon in question had been actively trying to hurt someone. That wasn’t much to go on, unless the Decepticons spent every waking moment trying to hurt someone else. World domination was all very well and good, but someone had to be the one to file the paperwork.

You shifted where you sat, leaned to the side. Instantly, the stranger’s mask was turned to you, in a move so quick you felt like the world had missed an animation frame.

Well, hell.

You made the conscious decision to fuck everything, pasted a smile on and introduced yourself. “Are you an Autobot?”

The Cybertronian didn’t move.

“...Do you speak English?” you asked, fairly optimistically. You couldn’t help but feel like you should be running. “...Sign language?”

Their head tilted. One long hand with digits so thin and sharp they could have been stakes lifted, curled into a fist, and nodded. Yes.
...Wow. This had come in handy surprisingly quickly. You finger-spelled your own name. *It's nice to meet you! Your name?*

The figure tilted its head to the other side. *S-O-U-N-D-V-A-W-E,* said slow-moving hands. *Nice to meet you.*

You were rapidly reaching the end of your comfort zone. You awkwardly curled your hands into a how near your stomach and pointed, eyebrows deliberately raised. *How are you?*

Soundvawe—you corrected the spelling in your head and hoped there would be a time when you could double-check—Soundwave tapped a sideways B to his chest and pointed at you. *I'm alright. You?*

You see-sawed your hand. *I'm okay. Little*—you pinched your fingers together—*H-U-R-T.*

Soundwave drew an apologetic S over his chest. You waved him off, pretending to show off your muscles. *Strong!*

Soundwave nodded approvingly, flicking a finger towards the ceiling. *Understood. How*—his was much more practiced than yours—*did you learn A-S-L?*

You drew your hand from your palm to your forehead. *Learn with O-P-T-I-M-U-S.*

*O-P learn A-S-L?*

You nodded yes. *Beginning.*

*Same. Thank you for practice.*

*Same!* You grinned, bouncing in place a little. Soundwave had come a few steps closer to you throughout the conversation, away from the trajectory he had been on. Now that he was in better light, he looked less like a bargain bin Slenderman and more like a person, if a metal, inhumanly gangly one. The sheer pointiness of his whole sort of situation reminded you charmingly of Arcee. *Where O-T-H-E-R-S?*

Soundwave shrugged. Fair enough.

*Where—he combined the signs for doctor and room. S-H-O-W me?*

He was offering you a...feeler to climb onto, coiling out from some sort of chute in his back. That was a new one on you, but ultimately, no more or less horrible than the ridiculousness you’d put up with during one of Ratchet’s holoform fashion shows. Still, you shook your head, signing *sorry.* You weren’t sure you were in the mood for the likes of Optimus or Bulkhead to carry you, much less this vaguely disturbing stranger you’d found in your friends’ living room.

Soundwave tapped his chest with his thumb, fingers facing up. *Okay. Walk? The mask on his face displayed two upraised ‘eyebrows’ above where his eyes might’ve been to indicate the interrogative. You relaxed as the feeler retracted, leaving you room to stand up.*

*“Aw,” said Arcee. “Breaking up the party?”*

You swore at the top of your lungs, falling on your butt. She stepped gracefully onto the floor, dancer-like, strolling in between the two of you like a satisfied cat. The effect was ruined—or enhanced, depending on your perspective—by the transformed fire-arm she had pointed at Soundwave. *“How was the hospital, by the way? I’ve heard they give you Jello, but Jack’s never*
really mentioned under what circumstances."

“I think I’m pretty well within my rights to ask all you tall people to make some noise after
yesterday,” you said, a little too loudly. “I’m happy to see you. The Jello was fine. Can I ask about
the gun?”

“I’m happy to see you too,” Arcee said, ignoring the parts of what you said that she didn’t want to
hear, “Although I’m relatively certain that you need a twenty-four-hour guard. How long did it take
you to find trouble?”

“I dunno,” you said sourly. “I think we got here a couple of minutes ago. Either stop pointing the
gun at Soundwave or tell me why we’re scared of him.”

Soundwave flashed an unfamiliar, angular logo across his mas. It was a stylized face, just like the
one on the floor, but triangular, with an almost vulpine point at the bottom.

Two and two finally managed to bump into each other inside your skull and became four.

“Oh,” you said, around the rush of delayed terror in your throat. “What’s the sign for Decepticon?”

Soundwave made a d and put the stem to the place where his lips might have been as though he was
shushing someone.

“Cool.”

“He’s here to pick up his boss,” Arcee said calmly, as though she was discussing the weather. “And
then leave you the frag alone.”

His boss. His boss? “You work for the guy who almost squeezed my lungs out my esophagus?” you
asked, baffled.

Soundwave nodded amiably, doing an admirable job of ignoring the increased whine of the gun
pointed at his head.

“Your boss possessed my friend,” you said. You weren’t actually sure what your face was doing, but
judging by the way Arcee was glancing over her shoulder and Soundwave leaned forward intently, it
was apparently pretty damn interesting.

You bit back several unidentifiable, vaguely violent urges before you spoke again. “Neat. Cool. So,
while I was playing patty-cake with one of the people responsible for Bee having been taken over--”

No, signed Soundwave. Not me. R-C was.

Arcee was glancing back at you again. “What’d he say?”

“You don’t know ASL?”

“No the priority right now, kid.”

“Don’t call me that. He said it was your fault, I think. Neither of us are great at signing.” The fact
that you had made it through a semi-coherent conversation with someone other than the person you
had been learning with had been rapidly overshadowed by Arcee’s little soap opera reveal, but there
was still a part of you that was pleased by how well you had done. “Speaking of which, why am I
not dead?”

You’re good, said Soundwave. K-I-N-D.
You flipped him off.

“Because something’s rotten in the house of the Decepticons,” Arcee said, almost airily. “Right now, Soundwave cares more about getting his leader back and ousting whoever’s taken over in his absence then he does fighting the war. Calling a ceasefire for fifteen minutes while we get everyone back in their skin is worth it, in the long run.”

You wondered how things were going to play out once that had happened. Soundwave was right there, standing in a room that was supposed to be secret and safe. If today went the way today was supposed to go, you had a feeling that it was going to take a lot of the regular sort of hassle—the kind that didn’t involve adrenaline and split-second decisions—to iron it out.

“Neat,” you said, as a handy alternative to tearing at your hair and screaming. “Well, what can I do to help?”

... 

The answer was, perhaps predictably, not a bunch. Ratchet took back over from Optimus, who had been watching Bee, and who in turn took over for Fowler in the ongoing effort to convince the human government that We Have This Under Control, No, Really, General. Optimus spared you a brief nod in passing, which was nice, considering how busy he looked when you saw him. You had a feeling that was as much closure as you were going to get with him for a while.

Bulkhead, Wheeljack, and Arcee were packing. The moment that Soundwave had stepped through a ground bridge into the base, it stopped being the base. The site was compromised, and the moment Bee was back in control of his body and soundwave went on his merry way, the ‘Bots were gone. Wheeljack had been ferrying energon stores to various caches in the Rockies all night, accompanied sporadically by the kids. Raf had slept over. You suppressed the urge, once again, the march up to the Esquivel house and demand to know why their youngest kid was allowed to spend the night wherever he wanted.

In the end, you wound up on Decepticon Babysitting Duty. Your job was to sit in a room and pay attention both to what was happening on Soundwave’s visor and to his various limbs and things.

It was grim work. Not because Soundwave was particularly unpleasant—if anything, it was unpleasant how pleasant he was. He answered your questions, he spoke to you politely in sign language, he behaved himself. He even showed you image captures of—they looked like baby pictures of various smaller Cybertronians, although the analogy seemed odd. There was a mechanical cat-shaped thing that stared intelligently into the camera; twins, caught while shoving each other, a bird-ish thing that could have also been a kite.

“Who are they?” you asked.

Soundwave tossed the sign for family over his shoulder, putting it in the past tense.

“I’m sorry,” you said blankly signing along with the English. Then, because you hated yourself: “Did the Autobots kill them?”


There was a lot of unspoken question in the air. You waited for him to pick one.

Soundwave used his ‘eyebrows’ display to signify a wh question. What is worth your family?

“I don’t want to answer that,” you said.

He leaned closer, kindly. It could have seemed intimidating, but it wasn’t. A hidden speaker crackled. “I--” said a raspy, creaking recording. “--ould kill--” said a different voice.

“-you-

“*Not because I want to, you understand--” That sounded like Knock Out.

“*But be--”

“--Cause--”

“*It would be worth it--”

“--f that’s what is required,” finished a silvery, cloying voice.

You sat back, thinking. “Can I ask you something?”

Soundwave nodded.

“How much of something can you sacrifice in its own name before it stops being about the *thing* and starts being about the *sacrifice*?”

Soundwave was silent for a few minutes. The same pictures flashed on his screen—the cat, the twins, the bird—before he alighted on a new image. A grimy silver Cybertronian beamed at the camera like it had hung the stars, triumphant and proud. The spikes on his shoulders were familiar, but not as familiar as the blaring, maddened glare of his eyes.

Soundwave sat back, question answered.

You waited for your heart rate to slow down before you spoke again. “You wanna know something?”

Soundwave turned his mask to fully face you.

“I…think I understand that.” Not entirely. Sacrificing *worlds* for one person wasn’t—that was the stuff of nightmares for you. The idea of someone putting that kind of blind devotion around your wrists and locking you in made your breath shorten in panic, and you weren’t prepared to put that weight on someone else, either. But faced with the worst decision in the world—*him or me, him or me*—you had known the answer before you thought about it. You were never going to be able to kill family. You just couldn’t. There were things that you had, consciously and unconsciously, decided were worth more than your continued existence, and that was a damned scary thought. That was going to keep you up an extra night or two. That didn’t make it any less true, though.

Soundwave’s visor flashed new pictures—muddled shots of Arcee and Bulkhead, taken in battle, one of Bee with his mouth guard down and staring up defiantly as energon ran down his face, a newer one of all three of the kids gaping upwards. A ‘wanted’ posting for Wheeljack, a picture of Ratchet at some sort of ceremony—and an odd picture of Optimus sitting at a table engrossed in a datapad, chin propped casually on his hand. You had just enough time to realize that his shoulders were smaller before he was replaced by what appeared to be June on her wedding day, the man standing beside her cropped half-out of the frame. The picture of the Wen sisters that had appeared in the paper a few months back. A grainy one of two men arguing outside a bar that could only be Mr. Wen and Mr. Callighan. Rosa’s badge picture. Nancy Queen as a small girl. Jass, looking identical.
A picture of your entire family. Your grandmother was in a black dress; everyone else wore dull black suits. You were clutching your parents’ hands, but the bruised knuckles on yours were still visible. There was a fresh grave in the background.

You took the knife out of your pocket and flicked it open, laying it against your leg. “Can you send me a picture of that last one, please?” you said lightly. “We actually lost our copy a few years ago. Basement flooded, you know.”

A second later, your phone buzzed. You ignored it.

After a few minutes, Soundwave asked if you knew ‘food’ signs. You did, but you weren’t very good at them. You spent the next hour and a half drilling each other. You made Soundwave hold the little flashcards you had made, which was kind of hilarious.

You sat in silence for a long while. You played modified hacky sack. You deciphered funny stories about Knock Out and his partner, Breakdown from ASL. You didn’t offer any in return.

Halfway through explaining the concept of role-playing games with the sixty words of ASL you knew, Arcee came to relieve you. Soundwave waved goodbye. You waved back, and the second the door closed behind you, you dug your fingers through your hair, doubled over, and sobbed with anger and humiliation and resolve.

…

And then you got up and started walking towards the next thing. Because that is what an adult does. They deal with things. Yes. That was what you were doing.

Any suppressed opinions you might or might not have had about your own mental state were wiped thoroughly out of your head by the scene the greeted you in medbay. Beyond the deconstructed state of the room itself, Bee’s body was sitting up in its restraints, fighting against Ratchet’s attempts to get him better secured to the table. “Bee” was spitting curses in a harsh, almost guttural version of Cybertronian, with more stops and starts than what Bumblebee usually spoke. It made have been lovely, in a rough, hey-old-chap sort of way, if the tone didn’t have so much venom stuffed into the words. Every bit of it was aimed at Optimus, standing impassively in the corner with the most shaken expression you’d seen on him yet.

The one thing more comforting than not having problems was knowing that other people’s problems were more immediate than yours. You stepped into the doorway and cleared your throat. “Uh, Ratch—”

The scene stopped. The thing in Bee’s skin—Megatron snapped around to face. Recognition and sick, wholly heartfelt glee twisted his face, curling scars that were normally obscured behind Bee’s mouthguard into view. He lunged for you, ripping out of Ratchet’s grasp.

You stood unimpressed as the entire table crashed to the floor. Ratchet and Optimus pulled him roughly back, dragging the table farther back than was strictly necessary, away from you.

Ratchet turned you to, a little out of breath. “What was your question?”

You scratched the back of your neck, deliberately casual. “I just thought I’d check in to see if you had anything for me to bring out for Wheeljack.”

Ratchet jerked his head at a cart in the corner, fully laden with boxes. A basket of colorful paper had been hung from the handle.
You walked calmly over to the cart to inspect the basket, aware of Megatron’s borrowed eyes on you. Not paper—stickers. Tons of them, covered in cars and princesses and cartoon characters. You thought you spotted a couple with quotes from books and things. The one on top had a picture of Gandalf, and said **Wizards Are Never Late!**

Slowly, you wheeled the cart back over to the door. You had to lift it over a bump. You had to wheel it around a crate someone had left in the walkway. Someone should move that.

About the time you finished navigating the errant box, Megatron began to speak in Iaconic. His eyes were on you, dancing with a fierce, cruel light that made you think of constricting fingers and airless lungs, but judging by the way Optimus and Ratchet twitched on a particular syllable, you weren’t the audience. You were just a prompt.

Once the cart was at the doorway, you stopped and very calmly walked back over to Optimus. You very calmly unpeeled the sticker, very calmly stuck it to his foot, and offered him a very calm smile when he tilted it to see. Then, you very, very **very** calmly pushed the cart out of the door, heading down the hall.

“You know,” Ratchet said wickedly behind you, “if you’re **very** good, you can earn a sticker too.”

The resulting howls sounded like a cat trapped in a trash can, but the control you felt as the doors slid shut behind you was just priceless.

…”

The cortical psychic patch was the key. Ratchet and Soundwave had designed an algorithm that would match the person to their body and suck any lingering traces of both into their associated bodies. It was clean. It was efficient. It was going to be a miracle if it worked, but pulling it off wasn’t your problem, thank Christ.

“Hey,” Arcee said. “If we’re gonna pull this off, we’re gonna need your help.”

Yeah, that tracked. You followed her into the main room, cursing only on the inside.

Your bike was still in the corner, kicked off to the side by someone whom you assumed was Wheeljack, because you didn’t always like him. You went and stood it up before you went over to the console even though the handlebars had been bent out and then back into place in a way that probably looked flawless when you were over twenty feet tall and didn’t know what bikes were supposed to be like. Everyone else was engrossed in arguing, still, so you certainly had the time.

It took them until you had walked over to the console, climbed up and played a full game of solitaire on your phone to get ready. The focus of the action was Arcee and Ratchet, who were exchanging tense barbs with Soundwave, who mostly just...stood there and looked impassive until someone drew a breath. Then, he’d play a recording or show a picture, and Ratchet would swell like a balloon of moral indignity. Arcee looked about one your-mom joke away from homicide.

“Enough,” Optimus said, striding into the room regally. “Everyone here is capable of conducting themselves with far more dignity than this.”

Megatron spat something from the table. Optimus’ back went ramrod straight, and everyone’s eyes flicked to you. Reassuring.

You gestured to your laptop, already connected to the software monitoring the cortical patch. “This could’ve been over with fifteen minutes ago, folks. I’m not sure why this is an experience you’d want to prolong, but here we are.”
Megatron garbled something. There was a soft gasp from behind Optimus’ ankle. Raf hurried over, shielding his face so he didn’t accidentally look at Megatron.

You helped him up, shooting Ratchet a disapproving look over his shoulder. Ratchet looked between you and Soundwave, muttered something about two of them, Primus, and starting plugging things into other things as angrily as possible. You shared a glance with an indecipherable glance with Soundwave, on account of him not having a face.

“Don’t be mad,” Raf muttered at your shoulder. “If they didn’t let me be here, I would have found another way.”

“I know, bud. How’s it going?”

He shrugged. “Better, I guess. Soundwave’s a lot less scary now. I’m glad you’re back. Did they give you Jello at the hospital?”

What was the deal with the Jello? “Oodles of it, dude. You know the bacta tank from Star Wars?”

Raf chuckled weakly, which was just about as much as that joke deserved. You pulled him into a one-armed hug, which he returned; and then the both of you pulled away and settled in front of your keyboards, waiting for the next step.

At a glance from Optimus, Ratchet pulled the lever and the ground bridge roared to life. Soundwave and Arcee stepped through, Bee’s body wheeled behind them. Ratchet followed just before the bridge began to close, a good twenty seconds after the rest of them.

A second later, your screen flickered to life—dual life signs and an audio feed. Raf had the same thing, but his was captioned in Cybertronian.

“Report,” Optimus said, softly.

You scrolled over the information. “Everything looks good so far, boss. Bee’s alive, he’s just suppressed. Megatron’s original body is right where they left it, I guess. Wait—” you stopped to listen to the chatter. “Initiating the patch now. Raf—?”

“On it,” he muttered, almost dazedly. “Does that look familiar before?”

He was pointing to a display on his screen, like a spectrograph and a heart monitor combined. You recognized it from staring at a similar one the entire night Optimus had been sick, but not from anywhere else. “That’s standard, right?”

“Yeah,” Raf said slowly. ‘But Megatrons’...never mind. It’s nothing.”

No one in this town could fucking lie. You ruffled his hair affectionately. “Gotcha, Raf. Ready?”

“Ready,” Raf said.

“Ready,” said Arcee over comms.

“Hrmph,” said Ratchet over comms.

“Ready,” said Arcee again, with a trace of static that meant it was a recording.

Well then.

You started typing, the stakes pressing down on your neck like a vice.
Chapter End Notes

Soundwave: these humans are very pleasant
Humans: get the fuck away from me
The speed needed to escape the orbit of a planet. At the Earth's surface, escape velocity is about 11.2 kilometers per second. The higher the object is, the less velocity is required.

There was safety in repetition.

It left no room for quarter. If he only knew five words—a name, a rank, a number—then there weren’t any left over to betray himself with. There was no banter. There was no give or take or compromise. There was just him and the pain and the words and the distance.

Until something was taken away. Maybe it was the distance. Maybe it was the pain.

(Here is an interesting fact: writing is an invention. Language is a behavior. People are taught to write and read, but language develops naturally, guided by the behaviors of the people around them. It’s like walking or breathing. The desire to be understood is an integral part of what and who we are. What we have accomplished and become. The ability to impart information beyond the here and now is one of our true advantages as a species. We are alone in this.

Or, we were.)

If you want to make someone scared, take away their power. Challenge their absolutes. Limit their options to the ones you control, and make that fact clear. Impress upon them how little their efforts affect their fate.

If you want to oppress someone, take away their words.

Call for help. Nothing. Repeat your five words. Nothing. Tell them what you think they want to
mad. Nothing. Try to remember what you’ve lost and wonder if you’re really remembering them or
if you just think you do, because what if the strange noises sitting at the bottom of your mind are just
that? Nothing.

Nothing.

A room with nothing in it can become the worst thing in the world.

…

The knowledge that he would need to recover after this hurt more than the physical pain. The bones
of his mind healed in uneven patterns, waiting to be re-broken and healed over days, weeks, orn’s.
Knowing that no one would care enough to help him heal was far harder to endure. The darkness
was horrible, the solitude was worse, but the wounds were what he knew would follow him out of
here.

Except--

Was that how it had gone?

Was he left in the darkness? (Did he never leave?) Was he forsaken? Did he crawl and claw his way
back to the light, fighting injury and madness every step of the way?

What had--

--we need a ground bridge now!

I don’t understand how he’s still alive--

Shut up and keep pressure on that wound. Give me your med kit, mine’s nearly empty. Hey. Hey,
listen--

You’re going to be fine, kid.

Bumblebee took the discrepancy—hope against determination, relief against belligerence—
and yanked.

Reality—or a vague shadow of it—sprang into place with an unsettlingly clumsy rattle. The room
was wide and open and vaguely formed, almost as if a second room had been juxtaposed over the
first one. It was full of familiar things, bright and airy and unsurprisingly battered. Bumblebee did
better than a lot of soldiers, but he had never held any hope of escaping a war unscathed. At least the
room was sturdy. A crumbling mind was the last thing he needed at the moment.

He stood straight, getting his bearings. The longer Bumblebee took to settle himself, the more there
he felt. He could feel the floor underneath his feet, the temperature of the air. His vision cleared,
except for a little around the edges, and it struck him how large the room he had conjured was. He
could have raced in it, if he was careful about the corners.

The darkness at the edge of Bee's vision seemed to swell and ebb, licking at the edge of his thoughts
like water. Oh, that was right—he was locked in here with an angry warlord.

The room cooled. The light seemed to lessen—not fade, but darken from clean white to emergency
red, throwing shadows into stark relief. The floor seemed to glisten strangely. Were those things in
the corners supposed to be blue or purple? It was so hard to tell in the light. If Bee hadn’t known better, he would have thought they were moving--

Something cold and thin and cruel as steel raked over the inside of his throat. Bee gagged instinctively, mask snapping back, and a spatter of energon dripped to the floor. Horrible searing cold seeped down his throat, liquid and cloying. Bumblebee resisted the urge to swallow, sure it was poison.

*Child,* his a voice without words. *Insolent. Undeserving and untried.*

That was what happened when you shared thoughts with a serial murderer.

The jagged thing in Bee’s throat pressed against the inside of his armor, trying to burrow its way out. Or in.

*Heretic,* hissed the thoughts of Megatron. *Little fool, little sheep, sent again and again to slaughter. What more would you sacrifice for the sake of a corrupt government?*

Cybertron didn’t *have* a government anymore, Bee griped in his head as he sank to his knees, trying in vain to massage his throat. Optimus might have held authority, but Bee had always gotten the impression that Optimus was waiting to dissolve his own office at the first given political opportunity. The only reason Cybertron was still a theocracy was that there was only so much duct tape holding things together in the current political climate, and stripping off even the stuff that was already mostly peeled away was liable to set the whole thing crumbling into pieces. Even as things stood right now, Optimus had direct contact with all of *maybe* eight people, plus the humans. That was less of a government, more of a club.

Bee was not the type to suffer for a government he had never known. His *family,* however--

Megatron’s outrage *squeezed,* cold and ugly and warped. Megatron wielded his thoughts like a hiltless sword, Bee realized through the pain—it did as much damage to him as to Bee, but that didn’t mean he was willing to let go anytime soon. Weaponized self-destruction. It explained a lot.

A feeling like a barbed-wire collar solidified around Bee’s neck. The pain—clear and fresh and blissedly *real*—was enough to force him to re-focus. Bee thought about the finger traps Raf had talked to him, woven threads made to tighten against resistance, and took the thought to the logical conclusion. The bonds fell away as he consciously relaxed letting the impression of *trapped-ness* slide away like so much water--

Megatron lunged.

*His hand was closed too tightly around something alive, fingers gripping tight enough that he could feel the individual press of crushed clothing and creaking bones. They look up at him, chest already fluttering for breath against his index finger—and he could squeeze tighter still, infinitely tighter, crack their hollow bones and squeeze the blood out of its canals and make their eyes go wide and still and lifeless--*

--it could be Raf--

--it could Jack--

--Miko--

--*It was them, the neighbor, their trusting little eyes wide with pain and disbelief. Their sweater—old and soft and familiar, the same one they had worn the day Wheeljack had come and they heard*
about Praxus and they had come and sat vigil with him and Raf and known not to speak in the silence—was stained red already, spattered around the collar. Humans—their blood was deceitful, it could fill them up and drown them inside, it could drain away without ever spilling and take them with it—would they drain away, slowly? Would they go cold and still in his grasp? Would he feel the moment they died—?

Bee shoved his way back to the present, whirling in disbelief. That had never happened—it hadn’t, Primus forbid he forget something like that; but it had hardly been Megatron’s memory either, not when it was Bee’s hands that had closed around...oh.

Oh, no.

The room darkened in realization. A cold wash of satisfaction swept over him, alien and distinct. Bee blinked, and—there he was. Megatron was standing over him—not looming or jeering, just watching, an oddly familiar little smile curling at his lips. Waiting to see what Bumblebee would do next.

What had he done?

What do you think I did, little creature? said Megatron. What do you think I would have done, given the opportunity?

Suddenly Megatron was right there, inches in front of him, far more vivid than anything else in this hellish place. Perhaps a better question would be, what did you allow me to do?

Well. That decided it. Bumblebee was going to kill him.

This time, it was his turn to lunge.

…

“Feisty, aren’t they?” You muttered, under the sound of Soundwave and Ratchet arguing over comms. Soundwave’s rebuttals largely consisted of Ratchet’s own voice played back at him with a warped filter, but that was more than enough to get Doctor Delegation Problems von Fisticuffs to work up a head of steam. It had been vaguely amusing for the first ten seconds. Ever since Megatron had gone under, it had been a little bit like listening to the audio half of a soap opera in a different language. “They’re like little kids haranguing each other.”

Raf nodded. He had migrated over the last thirty minutes to lean against you, hunched over his computer like a little gargoyle. Every once in a while, you touched his shoulder to get him to straighten his posture, but sooner or later he always wound up with his nose practically pressing against his computer screen. “I think they knew each other before,” he said. “It’s kinda like—you know those soap operas where someone’s partner meet their ex, and they’re both really mean? I think it’s like that, except instead of a person it’s Cybertron.”

Optimus nodded in absent agreement, eyes on his own screen. He was in closed communication with Arcee on a tablet, and had been struggling for the last half-hour to keep Soundwave unaware of it. It seemed to be a full-time job. Hacking was not your strong point—not that people seemed to believe that, given the kinds of projects Ratchet and Fowler had tried to foist on you—but you had the impression that Optimus was just about better at hiding information than Soundwave was at getting it. It was a pretty subversive skill for a general or a spiritual leader to have. You wondered what Optimus had done for a living before he had...taken office? Been coronated? Something. The idea of him working an I.T. job or something was vaguely hilarious.

Raf nudged you. “Does this look right?”
You leaned over to read his code. “Check your brackets, bud.”

“Oh. Thanks.” A line of red code went black as he corrected his mistake. “I--” His head dipped towards the screen, hiding his expression from you. “I wish I was there.”

Your hands froze over the keyboard. Over the line, Soundwave quoted a string of Iaconic Cybertronian back at Ratchet. He screeched indignantly. “Raf—bud, Bee would want you safe.”

He frowned. “Bee would want to not be alone.” Raf typed the next line a little harder than strictly necessary. “That’s wrong, by the way.”

“This is a comment, not active code.” You closed the line with a slash, and it obediently highlighted green. “How do you think Bee would feel if he woke up and you were hurt?”

“He’d mmph mph.”

“What?”

“I said that he’d feel bad,” Raf said uncharitably. His little head dipped a fraction of an inch. “I know, okay? I just want him home.”

You put your arm around his shoulders and squeezed briefly. “He will be. We’re gonna make sure.”

Raf shrugged you off. You let him.

For a few minutes, you focused on the status updates over comms.

“The Decepticons are going to try to kill them, right?” Raf said quietly.

If you were lucky. In a group of six soldiers, three were behind enemy lines, including the only medic and one of the Autobots’ best warriors. Them walking directly into a room filled with mind-reading equipment sounded like the Decepticons’ dream come true.

You glanced at Optimus. The display on his screen looking absolutely nothing like what you and Raf were using. Whatever he and Arcee were planning, you had to hope it was something extra to get all of them home safe.

“Cortical patch holding,” said Arcee. “How are we looking?”

You maximized the window with Bee’s vitals. “Uh. All over the place?”

“He’s caught up in something,” Ratchet said distractedly. “The algorithm’s in place, but the requirements to activate it aren’t met.”

Raf looked at you as if you might be able to provide clarification. “What do we do?”

There was a muffled clank over the line. Ratchet snarled in outrage.


“All routes must be explored,” Soundwave said via Optimus’ voice. Real Optimus shifted, unimpressed.

You squinted. “Would it help if I called Bee?”

Raf and Optimus blinked at you in off-putting unison. The line went still.
“Putting aside the idea that it would even work,” Ratchet said carefully, “Why?”

“They successfully contacted me,” Optimus offered. “An open line of communication—”

“They couldn’t have.”

Optimus glanced at you. “They did. Would such an attempt pose any danger to Bumblebee?”

“No, because it wouldn’t work. If it was that easy to contact someone in a coma, medics would have been doing it ages ago,” Ratchet snapped. “If it would make you feel better, go right ahead.”

You pulled your phone out and hit Bee’s icon. His was the only contact with neither a call nor a text history outside of group chats. Raf leaned closer, watching the ellipse bounce as the call struggled to connect.

You tilted it so he could see. “You okay with translating?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “I don’t think it’ll actually work, though. Even if you got service on the Nemesis, communications have to go two ways. There has to be an active receiver for you to—”

The line connected.

…

Something connected.

Bumblebee tore himself out of the last memory (cold and dark and cold and dark, stone and silence going on into forever) and grabbed at it. The familiar half-meaningful garble of writing took a half-second to resolve itself into something he could understand: incoming call.

Megatron hissed, high and sharp, and slammed him into a wall that hadn’t been there a second ago, scrabbling for it. Bee shoved him back—they were on an even playing field here, if nowhere else—and accepted it.

There was a long moment of silence.

[b]i[/b]? Said a familiar voice. [bʌmblbi?]

It was--

…

“It’s him, I think,” you muttered. Ratchet started to explain how you were wrong in the background. You ignored him. “But he hasn’t said anything.”

Raf leaned over. “Can I give it a try?”

You passed your phone over. “Sure.”

…

[əl], said the last human Bee had expected to hear from.

“Bee?” said Raf. “Bee, are you there?”

Bumblebee closed his eyes, feeling so very tired. They had come for him. In spite of it all—
impossibilities and obstacles and the fact that he had attacked a member of the team, even if they were somehow alright—they were here. Bee could hear them--

Something slammed into him from behind.

... 

You reared back. “What the hell was that noise?”

“They are struggling,” Optimus said. He was leaning over the two of you intently, tablet propped against the side of the catwalk. “For dominance of their shared mind, or simply for definition from one another. The algorithm will not activate if there is a chance Megatron will be unable to detach himself--” he hesitated the barest bit. “--cleanly.”

Delightful. You tapped the phone. “You two, knock it off.”

... 

[Ju tu, nɔk ɪt ɔf], said the neighbor urgently. Well and good for them to say, Bee barely had time to think, and then he was yanked into another painful memory. For a second, he was surrounded by the fires of a part of Tarn that had burned to ash long before Bumblebee had come online. Someone else’s rage burned in his chest, deep and seething. Outside of him, Megatron roared in equal parts triumph and pain.

Bee recoiled and shoved his way into better memories of fire—sitting in the company of the old Ops team, their faces carefully shaded, but the feelings still steady and sincere. Affection and heartache mingled one on top of the other. It had been the very last time Bee had seen the old crew all in one place—some, never again. The pain of loss and distance was easy to summon up.

Megatron howled in surprise and pain. Bee could feel him warping like a wooden box under pressure, trying to accommodate emotions he was unused to containing. If he wasn’t careful, he’d break.

“Bee,” said Raf urgently. “Stop it, just get away from him. Just please go, okay? Put as much distance between you as possible--”

Perhaps I don’t want to leave anymore, Megatron snarled.

... 

You picked up the comms. “Soundwave? Your boss is being whiny.”

“He does that,” Soundwave said in an airy voice. “Just—good kick in the pants, that’s what that one needs--”

... 

“Did you get any of that?” Raf asked.

No, Bee had not. He was busy fighting for his sanity and putting up with how difficult it was to understand people with his handicap software offline. But thank you for asking.

... 

Raf tilted his head up, exasperated. “He’s such a butt. Optimus, can you talk to him?”
YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN A DIRECTIVE, SOLDIER, said Optimus, in his least sanity-inducing voice. YOU ARE TO FOLLOW IT.

Bee hated when Optimus did that—the familiar pull to snap-to and attend and obey, no matter what it was that had been asked of him. It was always things he would have done anyway; there wasn’t any need to tap into his primordial programming and force him or whatever it was that happened. At least he was easy to understand, even if it felt like the words were being punched into Bumblebee’s understanding.

He sighed, and thought of falling—him one way, Megatron the other. Hopefully, the rest of the team would attend to the next steps before Bumblebee’s own sense of internal logic dashed him to pieces against some made-up ground.

“We’re on the clock but that did it,” Raf said, very quickly. “Uh. Ratchet? Ratchet? Ratchet--?”

“Initiate,” Ratchet ordered.

“Link established,” Arcee reported. “Three. Two. One--”

A few things happened at once. You were only aware of a few of them at the time, but various people would fill you in as time passed.

Optimus and Soundwave had once worked together, Optimus would reveal to you months or years into the future, closely enough that both felt sure they were able to predict to some extent what the other would do. While he had more extensive knowledge in terms of decryption, database architecture, et cetera, Optimus was well aware there was no way he could out-maneuver the person who had taught him to communicate covertly in cyberspace without due preparation. Furthermore, Soundwave would have known to expect some superficial level of duplicitousness, at the very least.

So, as Arcee would tell you in a month or so, he had pulled her aside and given her orders beforehand, with the understanding that they would rig a dummy channel between them to satisfy Soundwave’s suspicions. She was to shoot the moment it was clear Megatron had returned to his body.

At the same time, Optimus had been sending constant updates to Wheeljack, who had been keeping a lock on Arcee, Ratchet, and Bee’s body since the moment they bridged out. When Optimus gave the signal, he was to open three simultaneous bridges beneath each of their feet, allowing them to fall safely back to the base.

This was not, at the moment Wheeljack proposed it, strictly possible. Which was why, Bulkhead would recount to you in a couple of weeks, He and Miko had been hard at work helping Wheeljack modify the B.S. to make sure no one, you know, died. Or was taken as a prisoner of war.

Just in case, Jack had been hiding by the ground bridge console with coordinates on the Nemesis’ holding cells, based on information scouted by Arcee during her first visit to the Decepticon’s ship a few days ago. As such, he was the first one to see the host of enemy ships appear on the console screen, all converging on the base. He yelled a warning.

Soundwave, fully expecting her to take action against Megatron, had moved to block Arcee’s shot before she had even finished raising her arm, letting it glance off his the armored plane of his shoulder. Bumblebee’s body crumpled into Ratchet’s waiting arms, Megatron’s eyes flew open, and
a host of Decepticon soldiers burst into the medbay, led by their second-in-command. Ratchet wouldn't tell the story very well, but he would eventually tell it.

The resulting noise was indescribable.

In another second, Wheeljack was reporting all three of them returned safely to the cargo hold at the top of his lungs, Ratchet was yelling at Bulkhead to stop cheering, help me get him into the Jackhammer, and Optimus had very gently scooped you, Raf, and Jack into his hands and making a dignified bee-line for the ground bridge. The comm line was still open, and you could hear a veritable choir of Cybertronian swearing.

“What the fuck,” you said blankly.

“Indeed.” The world whipped around, and you landed on Optimus’ front seat alongside Raf and Jack, your things piled neatly in the foot space. It took you a minute to realize he had transformed around you. “We will scatter until you can be returned to Jasper without suspicion.”

“Gimme mine.” Arcee slid to a racing stop through the doorway, Bulkhead clanking along behind her, holding Miko. “We’ve got a few minutes. Wheeljack’s set to operate the bridge before he gets himself and Ratchet’s portable medbay out of here. Raf, your choices are me, Bulkhead or Optimus.”

“Bee,” Raf said evenly, as Jack jumped down with a stumble and ran over to Arcee. “I want to go with Wheeljack.”

“Buddy,” Bulkhead shook his head. “The Jackhammer’s gotta lose the Nemesis’ sensors. They’re gonna be gone for a while.”

“Yup.” Raf jumped down.

“Can I--” Bulkhead covered Miko with his other hand.

“No,” Optimus said, not unkindly. “You may go with one of the others. This is not up for discussion.”

“My parents won’t notice,” Raf said stolidly. “I’m smart, I can help--”

“We don’t have time for this,” Arcee growled, and made as if to grab him.

“Wait.” You climbed out of Optimus’ cab, ignoring his sigh that all three of the humans he grabbed and out in a neat row had managed to spread themselves out again. “Raf, here.”

He squinted at you suspiciously.

You offered your phone. “Line’s still open. Explain the situation in ten seconds or less and listen to what Bee has to say.”

Raf took the phone reluctantly and turned away from the rest of the room. Wheeljack sauntered into the room as Bulkhead and Arcee transformed, humans hurrying into place. You climbed back into Optimus’ cab, patting your pant pockets to make sure you had your wallet and keys. The edge of your laptop was visible through the opening of your bag.

Raf tossed your phone up to you and stumbled over to Bulkhead, visibly shaking. As he climbed into the backseat, you made out the silhouette of Bulkhead’s holoform opening his arms to bury the kid in a hug.
It occurred to you that this might be the last time you saw any of these people. Or, you could see them in a day or so.

“Best wishes to Ratchet,” you told Wheeljack. “Tell him ‘good job’ for me.”

Wheeljack nodded knowing. “Undying love to Ratchet. Understood.”

“I’ll take it.” you settled into the seat and picked up your phone. You had a text from Bee--<3.

“Take care of each other,” Optimus said. “There shall be no communications beyond emergency updates and distress signals until Ratchet sends the word. Group one—”

Wheeljack hit the switch, and the ground bridge roared to life. Jack put his helmet on.

“--roll out.” Arcee slammed the accelerator and roared out of sight. Wheeljack re-calibrated the coordinates, disrupting the flow of green light for a scant moment.


He disappeared in a squeal of tires. Wheeljack adjusted the control board again. “Group four due out in T-minus--” He glanced at the seven blinking dots on the console screen. “--just under two minutes. Group three, get outta here.”

“Safe travels,” Optimus told him, and then you were moving through light and pattern and energy. You closed your eyes and focused on catching your breath, phone gripped tightly in your hand. You turned it off by feel.

When your vision cleared, you were on a gravel path in the woods, the road in front of you a slurry of snow and mud. The sun was blindingly bright in that way which meant it was intolerably cold.

“Where are we?” You hugged your torso. You weren’t cold now, but you were achingly aware of how thin and uninsulated your tanktop was.

“We are near the outside the town of Paris, Maine,” Optimus said. “Since your last trip here was cut short, it seemed fitting. And hopefully unpredictable.”

You breathed shakily. “I don’t have a coat.”

“One can be acquired.” Optimus started moving again. “If you are cold at present, there are blankets behind the seat.”

You checked. “Are these all the blankets you guys had on base?”

“...Yes.”

“Why?” Evacuation meant the essentials, and the essentials only. There was a reason the only things the bots had been focused on moving was medical equipment and fuel.

“Because it is difficult to lose a home,” Optimus said, nearly matter-of-factly. “And it is comforting to be able to care of one another.”

“Yeah. I get that.” There were tears welling in your eyes. You pressed your fingers into the corners hard enough to hurt. “Are we going back to Jasper?”

“Eventually. We are waiting for information on the rendezvous point from Fowler, where he will brief me on what candidates he has found for possible base sites. There, we will begin to consider the
logistics of ferrying personnel and energon to the most eligible place.”

You laughed wetly. “You make it sound easy.”

“We have done this before,” he admitted. “There are protocols in place.”

You nodded. “Hey. You okay?”

He hesitated.

“Okay,” you said softly. “That’s okay. We’ll get there.”

Optimus didn’t say anything for a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

yeeeee

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