Summary

Their world destroyed by the arrival of Galvatron and the Fallen, a group of Autobots, Decepticons and humans tried to survive. They made a choice-- and now, they find themselves with the chance to fix things… to fix everything. Sequel to Fallout.
They shouldn't be alive.

There was too much—too much of everything. The fires, the monsters, the metal harbingers of devastation—of hope.

How could they be alive, now?

He had expected them to last at most, a few days. After everything—after all that had happened, living just seemed... implausible.

And yet, here they were, weeks later.

There was so much to do, so much to worry about. So much to pray and cry over.

So many dangers still to come.

He knew it—they all knew it.

They could get past this. They just had to try. They just had to believe that yes, this could get better. They could save their world. That they... they could do it, even if every day, things looked just a little darker than the day before.

They shouldn't be alive, but they were. And until the day there weren't any of them left—they would hold onto hope.

Sam looked at the sky and sighed.

End

Prologue.
Welcome back to the magically depressing world of Fallout! If you're a new reader, I humbly suggest you read Fallout (the first story), which you can find on my story list on my profile. You don't necessarily need to read it all to understand what's going on, but I'd suggest reading chapters 1-6 (Introductions), plus 25, 38, 40 and 50 to have a clue as to why and how things are happening.

Firstly: THIS IS NOT A HAPPY STORY. Even more so than the first, I wager. Characters die. Lives are changed and there are many philosophically and existentially disturbing things that will be covered within Fallout: Apocalypse. If you can't stand those topics or religious ideology or lots of depressing things being discussed, this may not be the story for you. Secondly: the plot, is of course, Science Fiction. Science-y things happen. XD Bear with me and the plot, please. Thirdly: No matter how dark this story gets, remember: the main theme of it will be about holding onto hope, no matter what. It won't be easy, but it's far from impossible.

All that said, time to move on to the story! :) Thank you for taking the time to read this story; it's probably my best fan fiction I've ever had the chance to work on and I'm so happy people enjoyed the first story as much as they did. Without further ado: Fallout: Apocalypse!

Many continued thanks to my beta, shantastic, for helping me make this series what it is!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

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The Alps, Planet Earth
2054 CE

He wasn't one for regrets. Sure, he had done stupid things. He had done a lot of stupid things over the millennia he had been alive. But Jazz wasn't a stupid mech. He knew he had to move past the problems he had lived through, problems he had caused… because giving up meant a lot worse than just a black mark on his soul.

For the last fifty-some years, he had lived on a small planet in orbit around a G class star. He'd come to this planet, Earth, as part of a small advance force tasked with finding the life-source of his people, the Allspark, and preventing it from falling into the hands of the enemy, the Decepticons. And they had been successful. The Allspark destroyed, the Decepticons far from Earth, he and the other
Autobots had enjoyed a few years of peace. And then war had come again.

For the past forty-seven years he had seen Earth degrade from the natural beauty that it had originally possessed into a bleak, smog-filled world where its natural inhabitants, the humans, were pressed to extinction. A world where Cybertronians had also been isolated from each other and slaughtered. Autobots and Decepticons both at an impasse, struggling to survive. But in the last twenty-some years, Jazz had found, somehow, something more valuable than an endless source of energon, more precious than rejoining the Autobots' fight. He found ten other people, mechs and humans alike, who had become friends—and family.

But it had started strictly by chance, when Jazz had run into an ex-Decepticon Seeker named Thundercracker. Realizing that they were fighting the same enemy, they became traveling companions and eventually, something more. Traveling through Europe, scavenging for whatever energy they could find and avoiding the drones, Jazz and Thundercracker found Rachel when she was ten. A lonesome and scrawny human who needed them just as much as they found they needed her, for her companionship and love and for her brilliant spirit. A few years later they met Wheeljack, an Autobot scientist, who had raised another human girl, Danielle. Wheeljack had a way to create energon and suddenly, things had not been so bleak.

A year later they'd found Wildrider, a Decepticon who had survived the loss of his entire Gestalt and the shattered bond, though it had left his sanity in questionable state. He stayed with their growing group, and proved to be invaluable as extra manpower. Soon after that they met Barnaby and his guardian, Piers Goddard, in the company of another Decepticon, Vortex, who had also come from a ruined Gestalt. Arcee was the last newcomer to their group during those first years, an Autobot femme. Despite their differences in species and faction, they formed a functioning group. They… were friends.

They'd all had their difficulties—just as they had had their losses. They had lost Goddard, a human whose wisdom had guided them as he had helped to raise their three humans, Rachel, Barnaby and Danny. After his death, they had met another human, Kassandra, and an Autobot named Bluestreak, both of whom had survived a horrific attack from the drones that had left Kass orphaned and both of them forlorn and alone.

Eventually these eleven strangers became friends. And Jazz watched them evolve further, from reluctant allies to something greater and more powerful than friendship. He relished the experience, never having had the luxury of a family. He had grown up on the streets, alone, with no real friends, only passing acquaintances for companionship. When the war had come, he had joined the ranks of the Autobots; his ruthless dedication to the Autobot cause, his determination to survive and his skill as a street fighter giving him an edge. Promoted quickly through the ranks, he never really made ties with mechs that were dying left and right anyway. He had found a niche with the other commanding officers, finding true friendship for the first time, but that too, had been fleeting. Now his original mate was dead and his fellow officers were also gone.

But here… they were all still alive, he and his friends. His family. He had a new love, Thundercracker, and they had been graced with a daughter within Rachel. The others became brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews… They had become everything. He would die for any of them, at any moment in time—

And as he lay there on the cold rocky floor of the Alpine cave they had taken shelter in for the last two months, Jazz realized that the moment to do whatever he could for his family had finally come. Except, he could not take the risk for them, he couldn't go alone into danger to spare them. They were coming with him. He wanted to insist that he go alone, find out if it was safe…
But they had no choice—they had to go together. It was their last hope. Their only hope.

Wheeljack had rebuilt what he'd identified as a space bridge. A space bridge that had been created deep inside this cave system by Autobot scientists, mechs who may or may not have sent themselves to death decades before. The eleven survivors had no idea what lay on the other end of the bridge, or if it even worked. Wheeljack swore that it would and Jazz trusted him to know.

Jazz himself saw no way around it. They had to do it, he reasoned.

Because the Earth was dying. Winters were growing longer and colder. The spring and summer were shorter and plant life was beginning to die off at faster rates. There were fewer and fewer human refugee camps around, and those that they did find were often ruins, destroyed by the drones.

The drones, along with time and nature, were their main enemy. Jazz hated the soulless, sparkless beasts. They could fly, moving like hawks in the air, and they struck out at anything unfortunate enough to cross their paths. They went after life itself, not just the Transformers or the humans. They were the last gift Galvatron had seen fit to give Earth—the gift of death for everything and everyone that lived on her.

There was no way to escape them. Except for… the spacebridge.

They were aiming for central Africa; undeveloped as it had been before the war, they thought it would probably be one of the least damaged areas of the planet. With luck, the environment would be better—for humans and mechs alike. The combination of more food and fuel with fewer drones meant that maybe… maybe they could actually outlast their enemies and natural woes alike.

Maybe they could find something better.

The clatter of a pan on the rocky ground startled Jazz back to the present. Danny was by the fire. She was talking quietly with Barns. A few minutes ago, Wheeljack had told them the machine would be ready by morning. All of them were too nervous now to sleep, but after a few hours of makeshift packing, he ordered a lights out. They needed all the rest they could get.

Jazz smiled faintly as Danny and Barns embraced; they were good together. He wished they'd had more time to let a relationship like that blossom, but maybe they would. On the other end of the bridge.

Heavy footsteps approached him. Jazz looked up and saw Thundercracker standing above him. Fifty years ago, he would have seen the jet as a threat. Now, all he felt was love for the ex-Decepticon.

"Arcee and Vortex are on sentry again," Thundercracker said quietly. He sat down next to Jazz, letting the smaller silver mech curl up against him. Thundercracker leaned closer, felt small hands encircling his back. The jet rumbled. "Jazz?"

He wasn't a coward, but on that night, everything came down on him at once. Every fear, every concern, every doubt—his spark ached. "M'scared," he muttered, knowing he could trust the jet. He was scared for his friends, for their future… for everything.

For all of his strength and size, Thundercracker had a way of being just small enough to make Jazz feel bigger sometimes. "Me, too," the jet replied after a moment.

"I just..." Jazz began. He looked out at the dark cavern, which only seemed to grow smaller and more dangerous now. He offlined his visor. "Primus, please let this be the right choice."

He did not want to drag his family into some suicidal run for freedom. Doubts plagued him. They
had some food here and they could use the energy from the machine for other, safer purposes. Maybe they could fortify this cavern for a semi-permanent base. Or turn it into a storage compound where they could go back and forth for food sources every once in a while—

Thundercracker's careful hand motions over his helm broke that line of thought.

"It is," the ex-Decepticon said. He spoke so surely that Jazz knew he was having doubts, too.

Jazz traced the scuffs on his mate's chestplates. "...I love you," he said. Human languages were insufficient when it came to expressing a lot of things, but some words just... summed it all up.

"I love you, too," Thundercracker replied. His words echoed through his frame and melted into Jazz's. "Be strong for the others."

"Always." Jazz chuckled and stared wistfully into the dark blue expanse of metal in front of him. He wanted to say a lot of things, but one topic in particular kept popping up in his processors, even though it was painful. "I'm sorry."

Thundercracker paused and looked down at him. Their green optics met with equal intensity. "For what?" he asked.

Jazz smiled tightly. "Not... bonding before," he said awkwardly. He laughed quietly and looked down, his spark burning. "We should have. Too late now."

When he did look up again, a lot of emotions were filtering over Thundercracker's expression. "...This is enough," the bigger mech said after a moment of thoughtful silence. He ran a hand gently over Jazz's shoulders. "Touch is enough for me. I feel enough with my spark. I am content like this."

"Yer too patient with me," the silver mech laughed, bowing his head. Thundercracker chuckled quietly against him. If they could only stay like that forever...

Jazz paused when he heard faint approaching footsteps. Glancing down, he could easily pick out Rachel standing there in the almost-darkness.

"Rachel," Thundercracker stated, acknowledging her. There was a question lurking in his tone.

"Hey kiddo," Jazz said as he smirked at his adopted kid.

The blonde haired woman exhaled heavily and fidgeted in front of them. "Can... can I sleep with you two?" she began, awkward. She was always awkward when it came to emotional questions. She hesitated before adding, "...One last time?"

Jazz was certainly glad mechs could hide emotions better than the humans could, because otherwise, he'd be a wreck then. "...Of course ya can, Rachel," he said. He offered a clawed hand to her. "Come here."

They used to do this a lot, in the early days when they first traveled together, before Wheeljack and Danny came along. Thundercracker turned slightly, mindful of his wings, so he loomed over the other two as they curled up closer. Rachel was too big to really fit entirely on Jazz's hands, but she seemed to want to draw herself up very small that night.

"I don't tell you this enough. Either of you," she said quietly, keeping her eyes everywhere but on them. When she spoke though, Jazz knew she was just struggling to keep her cool. "I love you both. Very much."
Jazz chuckled and glanced up at Thundercracker, whose green optics were soft with his own guarded emotions. "We love you, too," Jazz told her, meaning it with all of his spark.

Rachel looked up at him. "We'll be together," she said, as if asking for confirmation. "All of us. Even if… this goes bad."

Even if it killed them or brought them somewhere worse than Europe. Jazz tilted his helm down to her level as Thundercracker gripped him closer.

"Yeah," he said. "Together."

That was enough.

When he offlined his optics, he was afraid to turn recharge protocols on, wary of what would await him in the morning.

Jazz onlined to the feel of Rachel scrambling off of his chest and Thundercracker vibrating next to him with untold tension.

By the entrance to the rear tunnel, Wheeljack smiled, unmasked.

"It's time."

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He ended the transmission and sat staring at the console screen for far too long. The others were waiting for him and, really, there was no time to be spent dwelling on regrets… or doubts.

Wheeljack valued science for its absoluteness. His calculations—his and Barns's calculations, he conceded—left no room for a mistake, he was sure. If something went wrong, it would not be because of the science.

They were… no not they. He was playing with fate, doing this. He had never been an ardent believer in fate or faith, in any regard, but he still held onto the idea that Primus was there… and that he watched their decisions. Whether or not he approved of their choices—of his choice—Wheeljack would never know. None of them would. In the end, he supposed it didn't matter what a god thought.

Because at that moment, Wheeljack finally understood Rachel's conviction on the role of a deity in their lives. It made sense as they stood at the brink of change, at the very precipice of either death or escape from this place that had become their prison and threatened to become their tomb—because it was they, the humans and Transformers alike, who had to find a way to live through the next few hours. Not Primus… and not God.

A pessimistic shroud of doubt plagued his processors and he tried to shake the ill thoughts away. Anything could go wrong, even with the sureness of science. Perhaps he had made a mistake, through a mortal fallacy. He could not bear the notion of being the one to send his friends… his family… to a horrible death.

There were no more chances to find another way out of this, Wheeljack finally told himself. The time was now to act… to escape… to give them all a chance at real happiness.

To save their world.

Whether or not he had made the right choice for them all, he didn't know. He could only hope that
this—if only this—would be one thing he did right with his life. He had made so many mistakes and lost so many friends. They all had. Wheeljack stood, spark heavy, and turned to the door.

If saving Danny, granting her this new future… if allowing his friends, his family the chance to live in a better world was the only thing he did right—then he would always be glad he had done it.

After shutting down his programs and setting out the items they would need for the transfer, he walked toward the exit of the cave to let them know it was time to go.

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Eleven years ago, she had been a child and a scavenger. She had lived with humans, because they were all she had ever known. That had changed abruptly one morning, when she met two enormous metal aliens who didn't just give her the opportunity to survive—they gave her life. Until that day she had been cynical and wary, mistrustful of others; she had never allowed herself to get attached to other people. Rachel had certainly never expected things to progress to the point where she would call ten other people friends and family. She also had never expected to see herself turn twenty-one years old, but apparently the universe still had tricks up its sleeves.

What she never, ever expected—and even when it did happen, she couldn't believe it—was the idea that Europe would not become her grave. Her parents had fled from New York, from America, but Europe had not offered them safety. Rachel Cooper had expected to die, like her parents and sister, on its soil. Inconceivably, she was not going to do that now, because Wheeljack had found the space bridge.

They were going to Africa and they would do it on this cold, unforgiving morning.

This… was actually happening.

Rachel did her best not to throw up as she shoved blankets and clothing into her backpack. They could not return to Europe after this, so they had to make sure they took everything they could think of needing. There was absolutely no telling what sort of climate or condition they would find southern Africa to be in now, with the threat of nuclear clouds from Asia and America and the general smog left over from burnt down cities.

They were headed into an unknown world and Rachel, for the life of her, couldn't tell if she was scared or happy. She didn't want to die in a foreign land. She didn't want to die at all. She was a survivor, always had been. This was just another step toward life. It had to be. And if it failed, it wouldn't matter anyway.

Rachel sat back and watched her friends packing up, now that breakfast was over. Vortex was pointedly sticking close to the humans and she smiled softly at him when he glanced her way. He kept his expression guarded with his mask on, but she knew he smiled back.

Perhaps the future was brighter after all.

Kass, her best human friend, was scrambling to get the cooking supplies together and Danny was helping, despite the fact the shorter girl still had all of her own bedding to put away. Jazz was organizing the mechs, figuring out who would carry which supplies. Arcee and Thundercracker were on watch duty right now, but sooner or later all of them had to move back to the labs.

Rachel shivered. This was actually happening.

"Barnaby, your bag," Wheeljack said as he walked back into the main cavern. He bent down to give the young man the black bag. "You should each carry your own things on the off chance anyone is
separated from the group."

"Is there a risk of that?" Jazz demanded, alert.

Wheeljack chuckled and shook his head. "I have no idea what the landing will be like. It doesn't hurt to be prepared for the worst," he replied calmly as he turned to return to the lab. Rachel appreciated the calm.

"I thought the worst was death," Vortex muttered. Below him by the fire, Kass snorted.

They weren't talking much and Rachel couldn't really blame anyone. She didn't want to talk about things that were serious, such as their upcoming flight into the unknown. She tied the straps on her sleeping bag down tighter than needed and just looked at the red backpack. It held her entire life, essentially. A necklace from her grandmother and a notepad full of unfinished stories. Everything.

Looking up at the far side of the cavern, Rachel was captivated by the blank stretch of rock that had made up their temporary two-month home – their final home in Europe.

She suddenly knew what she had left to do.

Grabbing a nearly empty can of yellow spray paint that was luckily not that deeply buried in her bag, Rachel hurried over to the wall. Judging by how empty the room was suddenly, she knew that she didn't have too much time before Wheeljack told them it was literally time to go. Words flew through her mind and after figuring it out for a few minutes, she got to work, painting the first few lines on the dense surface.

Europe was not her native land, but Earth was and this was still Earth, no matter how broken it was. Rachel bit her lip as she tried to keep the letters straight and legible over the uneven canvas. They were leaving a broken, dying, hellish land where none of them had a real future. They were going somewhere better, a place where she could survive.

But this was still her home.

She paused at the beginning of the third line, hearing footsteps behind her. Soft, small ones, clearly human.

"What are you doing?" Danny asked, peering over her shoulder. She looked at the half finished poem with interest.

"I don't want to leave here without leaving something behind," Rachel explained, shaking the can again. She stared at the blank rock, her only tablet left. "This is our home. Or it was. We'll never come back here and I…"

She stopped and just stared at the words. The remaining couplet was still inside her mind, screaming to see daylight, begging for minds other than hers to acknowledge its words, its truth.

In the midst of their screaming, Rachel suddenly felt oddly calm.

"I just want to leave a part of me here, too," she continued, lifting the spray can up to the rock again. "In case someone ever sees this place."

She had littered the world, or what was left of it, with her various thoughts and words whenever they'd had the opportunity to stop where there was room to write on walls or boulders. Most likely, no one would ever read them; she knew that. But deep inside her heart, she couldn't shake the urge to share the brief stanzas that were splinters off of her own soul.
She had to leave something behind, just… just in case… someone was still out there left to read it. To confirm her own self. To put down as solid proof that yes, she did in fact live, exist, and would always be part of their lonely, dying world.

Danny watched her paint the words out and then wrapped her arms around the taller girl's shoulders once the poem was done. "…It'll be okay, Rachel," she said quietly, hugging her tightly.

Smiling, Rachel glanced at her friend. "I hope so."

Hearts in hand, we go on,
For hope, for family, for love of life—
Goodbye, dear home, forget us not,
As we escape into the light.

Rachel stood back, reading the words over, her heart both heavy and lightweight all at the same time. She smiled gently, knowing that whether or not anyone ever found them, she would remember the words for as long as she was alive.

"We're headed in, Rachel," Jazz said, stopping for her at the fork in the path. She looked up at him.

"Let's go," she said, smiling. He smiled back.

And then they walked toward the lab and whatever else waited for them there.

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End Chapter One.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Unsurprisingly, Kass felt a little nervous. In less than an hour, they would step onto the space bridge platform to be disintegrated (she couldn't think of a word that fit better) and sent flying through space. According to Wheeljack's information, they would travel over four thousand miles in the blink of an eye, then be reintegrated somewhere in what used to be the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Adrenaline had gotten her through the night and morning and it was still keeping her on her feet. Although they had been working towards this goal for two months, it still seemed fantastic that they would be leaving Europe for good.

Kass giggled; in an hour, they'd be standing in Africa! It was amazing how much plans could change in just a few months' time.

For her part, she was done packing. Everything was ready. Her own personal items were safely stored away in her pack. Their communal items, things like pots and pans, extra blankets and food reserves had been picked up and were all safely being carried by a mech or human. The cave was empty save those few bags the humans would carry. Rachel and Danny were talking by a wall and Jazz was directing Wildrider and Arcee on how to properly store and carry several spare cubes of energon that Wheeljack had whipped up for them to have on hand, just in case. Thundercracker had asked Bluestreak and Kass to take the short remaining watch duty while he subspaced even more energon for the trip. Everyone was concerned that they might not quickly find suitable energy sources where they were landing, so they wanted to prepare properly.

Kass stood at the entrance to their cavern base and just... breathed. The alpine air was cold, bitter and it cleared her mind like nothing else. She had so many thoughts dancing around her head, but she tried to keep thinking positive thoughts about the future. At least they had one now, unlike three months ago. It might have been a risky plan, but it was a plan.

The sound of Vortex snapping at Wheeljack in the background ("Why the frag are you making me carry the fragging converter? Carry it yourself." "Just do it, Vortex. I have other concerns.") made Kass smile. Even while headed into the unknown, they were still the same group of survivors, the same friends and family. Bluestreak glanced at her and noticed her smile.

"Are you excited, Kass?" he asked, cheerful. He was always upbeat, even when they were facing the greatest adventure they'd ever faced before.

"Just a bit," Kass said, stretching. She tried to clench down the nervous butterflies in her gut. "I can't wait to see the sun."

Throughout her whole childhood the elders of her camp had told stories, memories, of what life had
been like before the war. Of what the Earth had been like before the smog had hidden the star. It was supposed to be so warm and lovely. She hoped they would see it often in Africa.

Bluestreak rumbled and his door-wings flared up and down erratically, in the wordless language that she was still figuring out. "Me too," he admitted.

"I've never really felt it," Kass said, gazing upwards at the clouds. February storms were still choking back the dim view of the sun they normally had during the brightest of days.

"It's warm," Bluestreak chirped. Kass laughed and swatted the air near his leg.

"Ha, I figured," she said, rolling her eyes. Bluestreak giggled the mechanical laugh he usually had.

"It gets under your plating and makes you feel… lighter," he said, gushing almost. He gripped his arms with both hands, quite like the humans did when caught up with emotion. It was endearing to see him do it. "It's like… happiness."

Kass smiled at her friend, heart rising. "I can't wait."

Sighing contently, Kass crossed her arms and watched the rising dim orb disappear into more cloudbanks. Someday she'd see it herself. If Earth hung in there, so would the human race. It might take until her great-grandchildren's lifetime to achieve it, but they'd get to feel that warm happiness on their skin, too.

All at once, Kass shivered. She blinked and looked back at Bluestreak, who was staring off into the distance the same way she had been. He seemed fine. There was a sort of tension in her gut, however, that got Kass to glance around nervously. It was like being watched. She wasn't one to fall for superstitions, but she never doubted her gut.

"Wait..." she began, stepping out further into the snow. It felt odd beneath her boots, but something drew her out. Something felt wrong.

Bluestreak moved behind her, curious. "What?"

"Did you just—?" she started, glancing over the mountain path that led away from the cave entrance.

Kass didn't hear a response or a question from Bluestreak as she cut off her own question. She didn't have the power to finish it. All air evaporated from her lungs and words failed her as an overwhelming sensation of shock filled her veins. She was staring down the sloped hill, the snow covering everything as it always did, but there was one thing amiss.

Without a sound or sign of life other than movement, a single silver beast slithered through the air, hovering just over the snow. Its long serrated limbs clinked and shimmered in the air as it moved like part of the air itself. Its one red optic telescoped back and forth as it examined the world around it before it finally discerned Kass standing at the cavern entrance.

*One red eye.*

Kass felt the entirety of her world shrink to the space of a single breath, concentrated on the red eye that stared straight at her.

*Oh, no.*

"DRONE!" Bluestreak shouted, his voice a thousand times louder than he normally spoke, or that was what it felt like. Kass couldn't breathe, not even as Bluestreak transformed his weapons and
opened fire on the shrieking drone.

It was happening again.

No, it couldn't be.

It couldn't be the same as the day her family died.

She vaguely felt the ground tremble as Bluestreak shot the drone down with two well placed shots. Behind them, people were yelling in the cave in response. She couldn't just stand there, but everything—

"Coming up the south side!" Bluestreak screamed, all soldier, the kindly boy within him long gone. He shouted over his shoulder at the others. "JAZZ! TC!"

Gasping cold air, Kass turned her head and saw what looked like gray balls shooting up across the white terrain toward them. In the center of each blob was a blazing red dot, a single optic that would search for any and every living thing in order to hunt it down and destroy it.

"Oh, God, no," she whispered, terror seizing her heart. Adrenaline surging, Kass whirled around and ran back into the cave just as the drones fired their own shots. One blast hit the ground and dirt and rock pieces flew up like shrapnel. She ignored the sudden pain on her arm—superficial, got to get weapons—and dashed across the cavern floor toward the others. Thundercracker was barreling the opposite way with an expression fit to kill.

"GET BACK!" the jet roared, letting Kass rush by him. Stopping next to Bluestreak, he opened fire on the incoming swarm, his mass and firepower never something to underestimate.

All at once, the nervous tension of the room had disappeared. Instead, there was fear and organized chaos. All thoughts of the sun, warm Africa and a new life were replaced with the cold realization that they were outnumbered and trapped where they stood. Wheeljack had run out to the end of the passage, optics wide as he saw the firefight erupting at the entrance.

Kass saw the drones trying to get into the entrance to the cave, but Thundercracker and Bluestreak were forcing them back with withering firepower and blocking the entrance with their own bodies. Their success wouldn't last though, even with Wildrider and Jazz helping. She turned and saw the others scrambling for some kind of plan to stand on. There were no other exits from the cave. They had no where to run but out towards the drones—

"Where do we go? !" Danny screamed, her huge eyes filled with fear. Kass must have been wearing an identical look. They were trapped, they were trapped—just like Goddard—

"Down the mountain!" Arcee shouted, kneeling next to Jazz to aim several deadly shots out the mouth of the cave.

"NO!" Wheeljack suddenly blurted. He looked at them all with a desperate shudder running through him. "The bridge! Get to the bridge!"

Kass gaped at the scientist. "What? ! Wheeljack, there are at least thirty drones—!"

With his mask down, it was almost surreal to see Wheeljack's expression morph from despair to optimism, from turmoil to control. It was even more startling to hear him start screaming out orders. "GET TO THE BRIDGE!" he commanded. He swung his arms toward the passage, already moving backwards himself. He was almost ignorant of Barns underfoot, who barely got out of his way.
"Thundercracker, Bluestreak—keep them back. The rest of you get to the lab! MOVE, NOW!"

Responding automatically to the authority in his voice, Vortex and Arcee led the way through the tunnel carrying gear and supplies. Kass stared after them, struggling to understand what was going on. Wheeljack hurried Danny and Barns down the hall, clearly intent on getting to the space bridge. Wildrider and Bluestreak were backing Thundercracker up, shooting past him at the drones trying to enter the cave system, but the sound of the buzzing and screeching outside the cavern walls grew louder.

They didn't have time.

"'Jack's right! It's our only shot, we can't outrun them any other way," Jazz snapped, pushing Bluestreak down the passage. "MOVE IT! TC!"

Kass couldn't breathe again. Everything was moving too fast. She barely had the strength to run after Bluestreak, who kept pausing to wait for her and take more shots at the drones. She waved him off, forcing herself to run faster. Every time the screeching sounds of the drones were interrupted by the scattered blasts of cannon fire her heart screamed in fear.

Behind her, Rachel was the last human to head down the tunnel, having waited for Thundercracker and Jazz. "RUN!" she yelled, leaping over rocks and debris. "Don't stop, don't stop—!"

No one could have done otherwise, not then. Kass stumbled at the forked path and Bluestreak grabbed her around the waist. They shot forward, Vortex and Arcee waiting at the door with panicked expressions.

"In the room!" Arcee yelled, the sound of mechs running with heavy metal feet almost overwhelming her voice. "NOW!"

Kass was beyond terrified. She didn't want to die like her father or her mother. Everything in her screamed to run the other way, to run OUT, drones be damned. They couldn't stay here in this cave, they would be trapped and killed and—

Thundercracker stumbled in after Wildrider; Vortex and Arcee slammed the doors shut behind him, and they locked instantly. When Bluestreak set her down Kass nearly fell to the floor in relief, realizing that all those tedious hours spent splicing cables had saved them, at least for now. Wheeljack was furiously tapping on the various consoles of the command center. Kass could feel her heart pounding furiously against her ribs and she felt sick.

"Get to the bridge!" Wheeljack commanded, consoles flashing brightly all around them. With a sickening crash, the drones reached the door, but a high pitched shriek of metal on metal was the only evidence that they had begun their attempt to break through.

Kass turned and stared out at the lab, watching her friends, her family, try to organize themselves. Wheeljack was shouting for them to get on the bridge pad, talking with Barns about power levels and guidance matrices. The doors kept thudding and the drones screamed outside. She could smell ozone and fire building up. All around her, she could see frantic movement, but in that moment, her eyes drifted to the small closet where they had found the body of Wheeljack's friend, Perceptor.

This had been his tomb.

This had been the tomb of six brilliant Autobot scientists.

And it would now become theirs.
It was then Kass started to pray.

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Thundercracker, for the briefest of times, thought they were going to die. Standing back, he tried to put as much distance between himself and the shaking blast doors, where at least thirty or so drones were attempting to break through. They had, at best, twenty minutes. For that lone second, he thought he was going to die there, and he nearly panicked.

But then he remembered his family was there and they needed him sane. He wouldn't let them die, so he wasn't going to die, and everything was going to be fragging okay.

"Everyone back up! Get away from the doors. And RELOAD!" Jazz was shouting, pushing mostly the mechs backwards. Bluestreak had again picked Kass up and Vortex had thankfully grabbed Barns and Danny to keep them out of the way of mech feet. Rachel had already booked it to the back of the room with Wildrider, both looking ready to start hurling grenades at the first sign of a drone.

Thundercracker braced himself and looked around the lab, ignoring warnings and alerts that flashed up to advise him of injuries sustained during the short battle. He hoped the machine really was ready and that twenty minutes was enough for Wheeljack to bring it online and get them out of here.

"God…" Kass hissed, examining her bleeding arm, pulling out a clean cloth to wrap around the worst of the wound until she could care for it properly. Wheeljack was still tapping in commands, and in response every monitor in the room lit up—most with graphs or scrolling lines of text. Overhead, all of the lights began to shine brighter, but then dimmed as the power was rerouted elsewhere.

Hearing her groan, Rachel whirled around and shot her best friend a frightened look. "Kass! Are you alright? !" she asked. She winced when a larger bang emanated from the door and the shrieking increased.

"It—it's just a cut!" Kass shouted back as she tied off the makeshift bandage. "Blue, are you okay?"

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" the gray mech was chattering. Still carrying her, he hurried to the back of the room, stepping up onto the launch pad. "There are so many of them!"

"Wheeljack!" Barns shouted, scrambling to get higher up on Vortex. "Get the bridge up!"

Arcee wheeled closer, face full of fear and determination. "How long will it take?"

"Not that long. Not that we have a choice!" Barns called back as he urged Vortex toward the launch pad. Thundercracker kept his optics on the door as it shook harder. Less than ten minutes now for sure.

Wheeljack worked furiously on the controls as the machine began to make noises of activation. "ALL OF YOU! Get on the platform! NOW!" he ordered the remaining people standing around as pistons hissed and the sound of the transportation beams were turned to maximum power.

"Is this going to work? !" Jazz yelled over the noise. Wildrider kept his cannons pinned on the doorway with a fierce expression on his faceplates even as the silver mech pushed him back toward the pad.

"Yes! Just trust me!" Wheeljack shouted back. He seemed almost like a stranger, with his obvious fear but clear determination and uncharacteristic command of the situation. He didn't look up at them
and he continued to manipulate the bridge controls. "Whatever you do, you must not leave the platform! Just—trust me!"

Thundercracker grabbed Jazz and hauled him away from the control panel, dragging him up onto the platform with the rest of them. They couldn't help Wheeljack set the controls. They had to get in position, be ready to go. Gradually a calm descended on the room; Thundercracker didn't know if it emanated from Wheeljack's serene composure or if the first shock of being found by the drones had finally passed, but everyone was quiet, except for Barns who was calling out readings from the small control datapad he held as he stood on the platform.

"Two minutes!" Wheeljack announced, just as a huge clamor reverberated through the room. Thundercracker immediately looked at the doors, which shook and began to bend at the center. They'd be lucky with one more minute.

Bracing himself and charging his canons, Thundercracker watched each crease and dent grow. He didn't know if they'd last that long, but he'd be ready. If anything, he would buy them the time they needed.

Wheeljack didn't seem to give the door any mind. "Seventy seconds!" he shouted over the noise of the machine, the screeching of the drones and the destruction of the doors.

Thundercracker tried to stand on the edge of the pad to let the others crowd the center, but Jazz found him. For a second, the two looked at each other and Thundercracker saw so much love and fear in Jazz's visor. The silver Autobot just… stared at him with a desperate look.

Wordless, he reached out and grabbed Jazz's hand. Jazz grabbed back and held on as if that could save them.

The machine was truly roaring at that point; the noise of it almost blocked out the sound of the drones' attack. Thundercracker kept watching the creaking metal, hoping that the door would hold for just another minute—

"'Jack?" Danny called, her voice breaking across the mechanical chaos. She was peering out from the center of the launch pad with huge eyes. "Come on!"

Thundercracker looked upward past the bridge's edge, optics finding the scientist. Wheeljack wasn't looking at the doors or at the controls anymore—he was looking at them. Transformers had very little control over facial expressions, as they rarely had a need for them.

But decades with their human companions had caused them all to pick up the quirks of a smile or frown—and even more complicated expressions than those. Wheeljack had his blast-mask retracted, and there was a look on his face that Thundercracker had never seen before, at least, not on the scientist. There was something off about his optics, his partially opened mouth, and the subtle contortions of the metal faceplates—

The look reminded him of grief.

Spark freezing, Thundercracker opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. There was nothing to say. There was nothing any of them could have hoped to say.

Wheeljack stared at them for a moment longer and then did something to the control panel. The floor beneath the group began to glow and the walls began to move—fast and then faster.

Thundercracker felt his spark turn to ice, his optics never leaving Wheeljack as the scientist hurriedly made alterations and operated the controls. Abruptly, it made sense—the two missing mechs, why
Perceptor had died alone, away from the five remaining mechs. Thundercracker knew what Wheeljack was doing now, what he was thinking—

The machine needed an operator, or else no one would be going anywhere. Even more than that, someone had to make sure they weren't followed. Someone had to stay behind to close the bridge.

Someone had to face death, alone.

"Wheeljack! What—'JACK!" Danny shouted, taking a step closer to the spinning walls. She looked confused. "Come on! Let's go, get over here!"

Wheeljack looked up from the controls and Thundercracker, trembling, understood. He grabbed Danny, lifted her up in his hands, holding her so that she couldn't leave the platform. Danny was focused on Wheeljack, and only fought to peer above the walls, as their world grew whiter and whiter.

"I love you, my friends," Wheeljack said, his voice carrying over the sound of the machine, the sound of the drones. He was smiling, though his image began to blur. "Go safely."

Thundercracker only caught a glimpse of Danny's face—but he saw the change. Confusion melted into alarm—alarm into panic.

"'JACK! GET OVER HERE! GET OVER TO THE BRIDGE!" she shouted, pushing at Thundercracker's hand. "TC, LET GO, LET GO—! 'JACK!"

He didn't. He couldn't. Thundercracker shuttered his optics, bringing Danny closer to him, trying to ignore her screams. She wasn't the only one to panic, the cries of the others beginning to overlap and the noise in the room becoming overwhelming.

"VHEELJACK!" Wildrider was shouting, shoving and kicking out at the mechs—Jazz and Vortex—holding him back. He screeched in Cybertronian, but the words were lost to the roar of the machine around them.

Something was louder, however—an explosion. Thundercracker looked up just as the doors to the room finally blew inward. Through the pure white light he thought he saw fire. Something around them seemed to change; the explosion, had it affected the bridge? It was too late to do anything now.

The platform seemed to shake and then suddenly, the noise stopped. He saw two green lights flash—too tiny to be anything but stars—and then everything shifted upward.

Clawed hands gripped at his arms and then fell away—as did everything else.

The last thing he knew was white.

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**End Chapter Two.**

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D: D: D: Sorry, guys. I had this planned since before *Fallout* had even started a year ago. Time for the real story to begin, oddly enough.
A/Ns:
-For some bizarre reason, my representation of the numbers of scientists decided to get jumbled up in between *Fortitude* and this chapter. **The facts:** eight total; five used their sparks, Perceptor also died in the cave, so we're missing two mechs. Sorry if I had made it confusing before!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Life had never been something she took for granted. Since the day she was born, the specter of death had loomed over her life in the form of starvation, exposure, disease, loneliness and the inevitable attack of the drones. Life had been so fleeting, so precious, that even as a small child she had known that every breath, every moment she could still think and move was a blessing, even if there was no higher power to give her that blessing. It was hard to find time to appreciate life; her days and nights were full of the work of finding food and shelter and staying alive. So when she woke up in the morning, Rachel would keep her eyes closed and smell and feel the raw Earth beneath her, relishing every muscle she could still flex, treasuring every bruise and ache—because those things meant she was still alive.

Today… she was very certain she shouldn't feel anything. Because she was pretty sure they were all dead.

She hadn't said goodbye to anyone. That thought alone made her heart break, though it seemed rather silly. If they were dead, it didn't matter. But she still would have liked to tell her friends she loved them. Apologize to Jazz and Thundercracker for being such a brat growing up. Maybe confirm things with Vortex. Heck, she would have liked to tell all of them what they had meant to her, having given her a home in a living hell.

Rachel took in deep breaths, well aware that there was still air to breathe. She had lungs—or at least the feeling of lungs. She could feel the Earth, full of dirt and grass, beneath her. She dug her hands into the ground, taking in every texture. She could smell damp dirt and distant rain. She could feel the warmth of the sun beating into her skin. It wasn't cold. It was rather warm.

Farther away, she could have sworn she heard birds singing.

There was no way she was alive. Even Africa couldn't be this temperate, not after all of the fallout from the war. And besides, the machine had blown up; that had been her last coherent thought before everything literally faded to white and then to darkness. The next thing she'd realized, she was waking up. Habit kept her eyes shut. She didn't mind not opening them, however; death made her body feel heavy and weak. She was most definitely dead. Her friends, her family, were likely dead with her. Rachel wondered if she could accept that.

Rachel didn't have the strength to open her eyes when she heard metal creak, ruining the tranquil silence. She couldn't be bothered to open them when the warm sun vanished and she was covered in cold shadow. The slight chill seemed to last for several minutes, and she had just begun to accept that this was what death really felt like when metal skin touched her organic arm, and her eyes flew open.
Wildrider crouched over her, optics blazing, but not nearly as brightly as the light streaming in behind him. He had a blank expression, but watched her carefully. Rachel stared back, her heart no longer beating. It seemed to be encased in ice. She felt like she was dreaming.

"'Lo, 'Rider," she said simply, her throat thick. She blinked away tears, trying to find the strength to move.

Wildrider whined and grabbed her up like a doll. Rachel grunted as she was forced upright and she tried to force the limpetness out of her limbs as Wildrider lifted her to his chestplates. He moved so slowly, it almost didn't seem like him. But he had the same paint, the same scratches, the same mechanical whine—it was really Wildrider.

Rachel slowly shook the sluggish feeling off herself and was able to turn her head away from Wildrider. She could see better now, but everything was so bright, it almost hurt to try to look out… at the…

Part of Rachel's mind stumbled and did not get back up again.

There was green—everywhere. The grass, the trees in full bloom, the bushes that dotted the field they were laying on—it was all green.

There was more than green, though. There were flowers of yellow and white hues everywhere, like they were part of the grass.

Rachel tried to remember how to speak, or at least, think. She couldn't see gray anywhere.

Wildrider seemed to be taking in all the sights too, because after a few minutes of just holding her, he put her down and stood up. Rachel tried to remain standing, even as her legs wobbled dangerously. She saw Thundercracker seated just a few feet away, motionlessly staring down at his hands, as if they had turned into drones.

Nothing made any sense, she realized.

"Where's… where's everyone else?" she asked, her voice hoarse. It sounded strange when the rest of the area was rather quiet.

Thundercracker looked horrified. "She was… in my hand," he suddenly blurted out, sounding strained. "Danny…"

Rachel didn't know what to say. She didn't even know what to think. She spun around, eyes taking in every sight. It was too bright. The sun made her eyes water. She couldn't help but look upward, at the sky. It should have been gray or yellow or a murky brown—

But this sky was blue. It was so blue, she had no comparison for it. Brighter than the Autobot's optics had ever been, it had a clarity, a translucence that took her breath away. She could see fluffy white clouds, some moving slowly and others moving quickly, high in the sky; she had only ever seen clouds in pictures before. Rachel gaped up at the sky, stumbling backwards on unsteady feet to lean against Wildrider for a moment.

They were dead, she realized. This wasn't Earth. This was a dream, an illusion. Maybe, heaven.

Rachel took a deep breath, smelled the warm earth, the sweet grass, the clean air.

Perhaps… her mother had been right.
Turning rigidly, Rachel saw that Wildrider was also staring out at their environment, optics as wide as they could possibly get. He was silent—far more than normal. Thundercracker just kept staring at his hands, terribly still.

"Is this heaven?" she asked, voice quaking.

She didn't deserve to be here, if it was. Maybe it was a trick. Maybe—maybe this was all just some twisted temporary status.

Wildrider looked down at her, expressionless. He looked away and seemed to be taking in their location again. There was so much to take in. It couldn't be real.

Rachel tried to remember how to breathe, but everything else was quickly becoming more important. "Where… is this?" she gasped, shaking so badly, her head began to ache.

Neither of the mechs said anything. Thundercracker finally stopped looking at his hands and he also began to look around. His horror soon faded into muted confusion and grief.

"I don't know," he said quietly.

It was too green. Too clean. Rachel sat down, too weak-kneed to stand anymore. Drawing her knees to her chest, she tried not to panic, only to realize she couldn't feel anything anyway.

"We're dead. We have to be dead," she whispered, staring out at the line of trees. Beyond them, there was more blue sky, as if the world ended there and they could just walk off into the clouds.

Thundercracker's body creaked as he tried to stand. "The machine… it exploded," he began, voice warbling with static. He stumbled, landing with a loud crash of metal. "Slag!"

Rachel looked immediately for the problem; his legs were bleeding. "You're all torn up still," she said, trembling. "From the fight."

The drones… they had overwhelmed their defenses. Thundercracker, Kass and Bluestreak had been beat up and they had to retreat. They fired up the space bridge—and then—

"This isn't happening," Rachel whispered, letting her head drop onto her knees. "This… can't be… happening."

It couldn't. They couldn't be somewhere else, other than wherever they went after death, because if they were really in Africa and the transporter had worked—

Why were there only three of them?

"There are machines coming," Wildrider suddenly said. He spoke without an accent, without emotion.

The three of them turned to what was apparently a road in the middle of the trees. Rachel could hear motors running, getting louder as whatever it was approached. Thundercracker hissed and Wildrider just stood there.

*This cannot be happening.*

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"Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God."
Arcee was sure that if there was one, after all this bloodshed and horror, he was more like Unicron than he was Primus. This... was not the work of a loving god.

This was an absolute disaster.

She had onlined to an unfamiliar environment, but thankfully, next to two familiar presences. Kassandra and Danielle were huddled together on the ground a few yards away. Both women appeared to be operational, but neither was fully coherent, let alone emotionally stable.

"Oh, God," Kass was whispering, eyes widely staring at the world around them, her lips moving rapidly to her hopeless prayers. She clutched Danny, who just stared out at nothing beyond her shoulder, and continued to take in deep, calming breaths.

"Is... are you alright?" Arcee found herself asking, gathering her own senses long enough to realize that they had to act. She had no idea where they were or where the others were; perhaps they were in Africa, or somewhere in between. Either way, they had to find the others.

Kass flinched, but Danny didn't even respond to her voice. "A-Arcee," Kass breathed, terrified. "I— I'm okay. Danny's... I..." She looked at her friend, who wasn't looking at them. Kass looked heartbroken. "Danny..."

Arcee felt her spark clench.

Oh... Primus.

This was beyond terrible.

They had no time to waste; she hardened her spark and turned around, optics blazing. She refused to believe they were the only ones to have escaped the trip alive. And she was certain they were alive. She could sense other life forms—all minute organic things—and she could feel the sensation of the ground beneath her. She had not yet returned to the Well of Sparks, and she was not going to go there without finding a way out of this first.

"If we have survived, then the others have also. We must find them," Arcee said, looking down at Kass and Danny, firm. "I can carry Danny. Can you walk, Kass?"

"Yes." Kass helped Danny get to her feet. Surprisingly, the woman stayed upright, but that was it. Danny rested heavily against Kass's body, trembling.

"Danny, it's okay," Kass whispered, voice wavering. She sniffed and held her friend close. "Come on. Please. We gotta stay strong. Stay with us."

Arcee dared to turn on her radar, knowing every bit of energy spent on searching for their companions was worth it. The ground, quite literally, had been ripped from their feet and there was no guarantee that they were in a safe location. They needed to get back together, as a group, immediately.

She couldn't stop the pessimistic thought from entering her processors, however: what if they were the only ones left?

That was impossible, she decided firmly, throwing the negativity away. As she had told Kass and Danny—if they had survived, then it was only logical that the others had as well. They would get through this, just like every other challenge. They just had to find the others. They would be fine.

At first, she didn't pick up anything on the radar but the two humans beside her. There were a few
specks of heat—wild animals—but nothing alarming.

And then, she expanded the radius. Less than a mile away, there were two huge beacons—too large for a wild animal and far too large for a human.

Mechs.

"I'm picking up two mechs, three-quarters of a mile west of our location," she stated bluntly. She turned and fixed Kass with a cautious look; she needed advice.

Kass hesitated as she dropped her bag to the ground. "...Are they... friendly?" she asked, looking wary. She was wise enough to realize the dangers of reaching out to unknown aliens. Blitzwing had taught them well.

"I'll attempt radio contact," Arcee said, bracing herself. There was no telling what was out there...

"What if that attracts the drones?" Kass asked, worried.

Arcee hissed lowly. "Curses." Of course there were dangers to this from every angle, even if the mechs on her radar were in fact friendlies. She looked down at Kass and Danny, considering their options. "...Would you rather risk running into the mechs blindly, or attempt contact?"

That didn't make Kass look any happier. "Damn it." She closed her eyes and then opened them, looking sick. "Radio, go with it," she said through gritted teeth as she reached into her bag to pull out what weapons she could, clearly intent on being prepared.

They didn't have much of a choice and Arcee desperately wanted to hear news of more of their unit being nearby. They had to take the chance. She sent out a short ping on an open channel, praying that Primus would lead it to friendly listeners.

::This is Arcee. Who is in the area?::

She never, ever expected she'd be grateful to hear Jazz's voice practically screaming over the intercom, but today, she almost wanted to grin madly at the sound of his voice. ::Sweet Primus—ARCEE!: he called, the beacons moving quickly now. ::Where're you? Who's with you? Stay put, we're headed to your location.::

::Kassandra and Danielle.: she replied, keeping all emotion out of her voice. They would find the others. ::Who are you with?:

Jazz sounded like he didn't know whether to be happy or upset by her statement. ::Just Bluestreak. Slag, slag, slag—:: he kept cursing. ::Is everyone okay? Are you okay?:

Kass was staring up at her expectantly, but Arcee focused on the comm. ::Everyone with me is alright. What about you and Bluestreak?: she asked.

::Way better now, believe me.: Jazz said mirthlessly, ::but once we get everyone else t'gether, I'll be ecstatic:::

Arcee turned to the path the other two were taking and braced herself—for what, she didn't know. She had been hoping, praying, that they would have all been together, but perhaps they would just have to take a while to find each other. That was all.

They could manage. They could handle this. They... had to.
Kass stared out with Arcee, nervous, but as soon as she saw the other two mechs—Jazz in the lead, Bluestreak stumbling not far behind—she brightened up considerably.

"BLUE!" she cried, attempting to move forward, but Danny was still hanging onto her. "Jazz! Oh, thank God, you're okay!"

Bluestreak looked just as scared as any of them were, but when he saw Kass, he rushed past Jazz with a mixture of relief and terror on his face.

"KASS! Kass, Kass, Kass—Oh, Primus, Kass, you're all right! You're alive! I was so worried!" he was rambling, dropping down in front of her and Danny, hands coming up toward them. "Are you okay? You're not injured or anything, are you? I thought—I thought you had—!"

"Have you heard from anyone?" Jazz demanded, walking up to Arcee. He looked positively frantic; Arcee could sympathize.

She shook her helm against the ill feeling rising up in her spark. "No, only you," she said. "My radar isn't that strong. Perhaps they are just out of range."

There was no way—no way—that they were the only ones. The fact that Jazz and Bluestreak were there, only separated, had helped ease her doubts. They just needed to move outward and find their missing friends.

Jazz nodded. "Primus, let's go," he said, glancing around. His visor stopped on Danny and Kass and suddenly he paused.

Arcee followed his gaze and they just… looked. Danny stood there with Kass, who was placating the frantic Bluestreak with calm words of reassurance. Danny just stood there, though. She stared out at nothing, her bag hanging halfway off her shoulder without a care.

"Come on," Jazz said softly. He turned and faced an unknown section of woods. "Let's move."

They had only gotten a few yards into the mass of trees, which seemed endless, when they all stopped. Somewhere, farther away, they heard an echo. Arcee froze as she recognized the telltale sounds of a weapon being fired repeatedly. She knew the sound of that particular weapon all too well.

"Was that—?" Kass began, eyes huge.

Jazz hissed. "Vortex!" he shouted, lunging into the maze of trees. "Double time, go!"

Arcee left Bluestreak to carry the two humans, her own hydraulics groaning as she sped ahead to keep pace with Jazz. Gunfire meant danger and danger was to be avoided—but if their friends were in danger, that meant they had to go toward it.

She just prayed, this time, they would not be too late.

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Well, this had certainly been an unpleasant last few hours, Barns mused, resigned to staring at ants crawling over dew-covered leaves and a single ladybug resting nearby. Either he was dead and had gone to heaven, or he had somehow lost his sanity in the result of their failed escape. He wasn't sure which would be worse. Both were quite possible.

He tried to account for the facts he was aware of: Africa was not this temperate. Even if the weather
changes had significantly altered the environment there, he was rather certain ladybugs did not live in Central Africa. The grass was far too green, too healthy and alive.

Another fact he was well aware of was that if they were not in Africa, and the grass and bugs he was looking at were really there, that meant he was somewhere else. And if he was somewhere else, most likely his companions were too. He desperately hoped that was true.

Gathering his strength, Barns lifted his head, which felt far heavier than it should have. His bleary eyes found familiar metal soon enough—Vortex was standing only a few feet away. Barns couldn't lift his head high enough to see his faceplates, but he knew it was the helicopter from just the metal's hue.

The heavy metal feet clanged closer as Barns tried to flip over. It took a lot of effort, but nothing seemed to hurt or indicate injury.

"Vortex?" Barns asked, squinting upwards as the helicopter loomed overhead, blocking out the alien light in the sky. Was that really—really the sun?

"Barns!" Vortex exclaimed. He hung back a little, green visor widening and then narrowing erratically. "Primus… I thought you were dead!" There was concern and hurried panic in his voice.

"I…” Barns began, failing, both because of the shock as well as for that fact, that for the life of him, now Barns couldn't stop coughing. He must have landed in a way that knocked the air out of him, because he just couldn't get enough air. Vortex had been seething silently, but soon started to hover, concerned, over the wheezing human.

"What's wrong? Why are you coughing?" the helicopter kept asking, worry traitorously slipping into his voice.

Barns forced himself to smile, waving his hand. "Just… knocked the wind out of me, I think," he said. He inhaled deeply and used Vortex's leg to climb to his feet. The feeling of being strangled faded gradually, so he was able to catch his breath.

"Where are we?" he asked, leaning against the mech, mind and body weary. He probably should have been reacting more than he was. But what was there to react to? "And… where… where are the others?"

"I have no fragging idea. Slag. Slaggit." Vortex looked around, growling. "My radar's not working. I think the blast shorted it out. Give me a few minutes and I can get it up and running."

Barns nodded carefully. "Well… work on it slowly, but don't hurt yourself." He turned and stared out at their current location and suddenly felt overwhelmed. "Dieu… where are we?"

Everything was so green. It was beautiful, and frightening, and so… alien. He could see flowers and the trees were full. He saw a red and brown colored bird fly overhead, disappearing into the light as the sun blared down openly through a blue colored sky. The few clouds visible beyond the mass of green treetops were white, oh-so white.

Barns just looked at it all and tried desperately to understand why he was seeing it.

"…This is Earth," he breathed, eyes huge. He stumbled backwards into Vortex's leg. His own limbs felt like they had been filled with sand. "Mon Dieu… c'est la Terre." It was impossible—all of this was impossible!

Vortex seemed to agree. He was noticing the odd nature of the landscape, glancing around with a
wary posture. "Th-that's... impossible," the mech said. "Earth... doesn't look like this."

On unsteady feet, Barns moved away from his friend. Everything was too much and yet not enough. He turned slowly, felt the damp ground beneath him dip slightly.

"We are alive. Dear God in heaven... we are alive." Barns laughed a strangled sound. "This is Earth. I know it is. I can feel it. I... know... this feeling, this ground." He crouched and ran his hand through the wet blades of grass, the fresh, green grass. "Mon Dieu. Mon Dieu."

Vortex moved forward and opened his mouth to speak, but abruptly cut himself with a short whine. He turned around quickly and faced the other side of the clearing they were in. His entire body language changed from nervous to battle ready, which was never a good sign. Barns crept closer, wary.

Far off, he heard a strange noise. It sounded like engines. Barns stared out in the direction of the sound. He couldn't see anything through the trees. It just looked like wilderness.

"...What is that?" he asked, dreading an answer.

Vortex stared out at the woods, his optics clearly seeing much further into the forest than Barns' meager eyesight. "Machines—energy signatures—oh, SLAG!" Vortex reared up, weapons whirling into life. "GET BEHIND ME!"

Barns had just enough time to hear the roar of a car engine—and then Vortex began to attack.

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The major was not having a good day. His wife hadn't called and their baby was still recovering from a bad cold. Being stationed hundreds of miles away from his family while inside his own country was ridiculously unfair, but he did sign up for this job, even the newer aspects of it. Life was never dull, and he was fulfilling his desire to aid his country on a higher level than he had ever dreamed of. Still, a bad day was a bad day. He didn't really want to answer the request from security to check out an anomalous signal, but he was an important leader now. He had to buck up and just do his job, like everyone else was doing.

The moment he entered the security office, he knew it was a mistake. The intensity radiating off of the various personnel in the room warned him of the coming danger, though nothing would prepare them for what they found later, he realized in hindsight.

"Major!" the chief officer in security cried. He was sitting in front of his monitor, pointing at the screen. "I think you should look at this, sir."

"What is it?" he asked, walking over swiftly. He could see various warning signs flashing over the map of the base on the screen.

The officer shook his head. "I wasn't sure because of the suddenness, but..." he trailed off, sounding uneasy. "Two alarms have just been activated. We need direct orders before I can send a team out, but... sir?"

William Lennox stared at the screen and whirled around to find an aide.

"Go get Optimus," he ordered. "We have intruders in the valley."
End Chapter 3.
Chapter 4

NEST Base, Plumas National Park
United States of America
2009 CE

Six hours ago, nothing had been wrong. There was nothing on the radar that indicated any extraneous life forms had entered the vicinity. Six hours ago the two hundred square miles surrounding the small, abandoned looking airfield that was actually NEST headquarters had been empty. Six hours ago the base had been secure, with no sign of intruders, as generally had been the case since it had been claimed for the Autobots nearly eighteen months ago. That large, empty space served as the first defense they had against intruders of any kind—Decepticons, journalists and wayward campers that ventured too far into the restricted military zone inside the national park. That open space, and the complicated array of sensors and cameras that made up their security system, had worked flawlessly so far. There hadn’t been any sign of Decepticons, and the only instances where the alarms had gone off were when unlucky hikers ventured into the restricted area and had to be issued tickets for trespassing and removed. It had happened several times over the past year, but had never proven to be anything serious.

A trip of the alarm, thus, was not too concerning anymore, at least as far as Optimus Prime was concerned. Ironhide was still panic-stricken over the idea of weak hangars in such an open area serving as their base, but it was the best the United States government could do on such short notice. Once they brought down the Ark, they would be okay, Ratchet kept telling the nervous weapons specialist. For now, a little security problem was just a minor concern.

…However, having the alarm tripped suddenly at three in the afternoon INSIDE of the first seven miles of the security net was a bit more alarming.

"It was set off where? !" Major William Lennox demanded, looming over the duty officer with a look of controlled, but obvious panic.

"Three miles inside of the Point C access gate, off county road 213," one of the intelligence supervisors said, matching his pace as he strode towards the armory. Optimus walked alongside the two humans, listening gravely.

"How the hell could someone get seven miles inside the damn net without being detected earlier? !" Lennox demanded, eyes huge. Optimus rumbled, wondering the same thing himself. "Epps, did you find out about local parachuting or—?"

"Air space has been restricted over the site for six months," Epps replied. He had slid up beside
Lennox as they walked, looking just as weary. "No planes took off at nearby airstrips, so either its some unregistered jumper or—"

"Decepticons," Ironhide seethed. He was not keen on matching the humans' slower pace and stomped by them. A newer solider to the NEST compound jumped out of the way unnecessarily as the black Autobot stormed past him. "I knew it! Fraggers have been too quiet."

Optimus hummed as he waited for the humans to get organized. There was no telling what exactly they were heading into, since the energy readouts had been inconclusive. They had to approach this as a potential Decepticon plot regardless of the potential for human interference. They had managed to form a somewhat defendable base of operations and they had to make sure it remained safe from any kind of threat. He just hoped it wouldn't be serious yet. Earth needed time to breathe still, even with Starscream still out on the loose.

"Alright, Team A is me, Optimus, Ratchet and Bumblebee," Lennox barked out as soldiers rushed to arms. "Epps, leading Team B with Ironhide, Sideswipe and Jolt." He turned to the human NEST members. "Squad 6, with me, and Squad 8 with Epps. Move out!"

Epps heaved a huge sigh as he finished suiting up with his ammo slings. "Just when you think those tinheads gave up," he muttered. He thumped his fist on Sideswipe's hood as he passed. "No 'fense."

Sideswipe revved his engine. "Let's just get moving. If we're lucky, we can kick some aft instead of just sitting around all day," he said enthusiastically. Optimus chuckled; they had been cooped up for a rather long time without a significant distraction.

Ratchet scowled before he transformed to transport several NEST soldiers. "You say that now," the medic groused. "Just wait. I'll be patching up you aft-headed morons for the next week, and you'll be whining about your paint."

Optimus transformed and allowed Lennox to climb aboard. He was unaccustomed to having humans inside him, since Lennox generally rode with Ironhide and the only mech who really had a "driver" was Bumblebee—who was on base for once instead of with Sam in Tranquility, Nevada—but he didn't mind it. The humans were company he'd never refuse, especially not fellow soldiers. William Lennox had risked his life more than once for Earth and Optimus didn't doubt for a second he'd risk the same for any of the mechs. They were shaping into a real team, not just some theoretical squad. The government had finally taken them seriously and authorized the formation of the Non-Biological Extraterrestrial Species Team almost a year ago. It was a far cry from the dignified Autobot army, but this wasn't about Cybertron anymore. This was now about Earth.

Lennox sat back in the driver's seat as they moved past the first of three checkpoints between the base and the locations of the anomalies. "Man, I miss the good old days when it was just road side bombs," the human muttered with identifiable sarcasm. He closed his eyes tiredly and shook his head.

Optimus laughed quietly. "It is probably just another camper, though we must investigate to be safe," he replied as the teams split at the main road. He drove onwards behind the human truck leading the caravan. "NEST has become a strong and able military body, William. You should be proud."

"I should be with my family, but that goes without saying," Lennox shot back. He smiled at the dashboard anyway. "But yeah, we're doing pretty well for some legal copy of Sector-7."

"We're better than those nutjobs ever were," Sideswipe snapped over the intercom, which Optimus let filter out for Lennox to listen to.
Bumblebee made a series of rude sounds in agreement. Ironhide growled lowly. "You newcomers never had to deal with them," the weapons specialist added. That was true; Jolt and Sideswipe had come via shuttle six months after Mission City.

Jolt made a sharp laughing sound. "We've had to deal with Simmons," he pointed out.

"Jesus, don't remind me of that guy." Epps moaned over the speaker from his location in Ironhide's cabin.

"He's visiting this Tuesday," Lennox offered helpfully. He grinned and looked out the window to a chorus of groans from the others. Optimus chuckled again. If Simmons was the worst problem they had, he knew they were lucky.

Even when responding to an alert, Optimus enjoyed driving through the forest-covered park. It was peaceful, entirely unique to Earth. It was so different from Cybertron—but so beautiful.

"Less than a klick to the site of the anomaly, sirs," a man in the front car announced via radio. Optimus focused his sensors on the surrounding area. They needed to be ready for anything.

When they turned around the next bend in the road, something blipped into existence on his radar. It was not a strong signal—it could be low to the ground, or it could be cloaked.

::Monitor surveillance::: he quickly shot out to the other mechs in his company. ::I am picking up an unidentified energy signature in the bush ahead:::

The signature grew as they approached and then he saw an opening ahead on the road, where the forest gave way to a small clearing. The glade seemed uninhabited for the most part, but that was the place the signature originated from. He wanted to tell the forward car to move to the side so he could take any potential strikes before the humans, but as they left the dense shielding of trees and drove out into the sunlit meadow—

Up stood a Seeker.

Optimus hit the brakes so hard, Lennox almost slammed into the steering wheel. The giant blue Seeker, who had been sitting before, loomed to his knees the second he saw the approaching caravan.

"Major Lennox, please get out immediately," Optimus ordered, throwing open the driver's side door, his battle programming surging to life. If they were going to take down a Seeker, he was needed to—

"Civilian present!" Ratchet exclaimed, transforming behind him.

They had not ignored the red-and-black mech who, while overshadowed by the rising Seeker, bore his own threat. He was no Autobot, none that Optimus was aware of, and even though his sigil was missing and his optics were green, Optimus did not miss the look of wariness that crossed the mech's faceplates. He did not see friends in the Autobots, apparently.

As Lennox leapt clear, Optimus transformed, knowing every second counted. Seekers were some of the deadliest weapons the Decepticon army had and they were not to be underestimated. Behind him, Ratchet and Bumblebee rushed forward with their own weapons out, recognizing the severity of the situation just as quickly.

"Decepticons!" Optimus began, sword unsheathing. He saw both unknown mechs tense, eyeing him and the other Autobots with clear apprehension. "Do not attempt to attack. Surrender and—"
Something hit the side of his leg, just below the knee.

Optimus had about two seconds to realize that neither of the mechs had moved. It was the tiny yellow-headed human who had stepped out from between the two mechs and thrown something at him. Just as he started to ask her why, the tiny object—a grenade, he learned in hindsight—exploded.

Pain and warning signs blotted his vision. He heard Ratchet and other humans yell. He was pretty sure the Seeker had shouted something as well, so he quickly shoved the warning signs in his HUD away—all of that could wait. When his optics refocused, he saw the human was now closer. She was not afraid, not of his mechs, nor of the NEST soldiers. It was patently clear she did not fear the two Decepticons standing behind her.

"GET AWAY GET AWAY GET AWAY!" she was shrieking. She reached back and hurled another grenade. Soldiers yelled and dodged. "GET THE FUCK AWAY, OR I'LL KILL YOU!"

The explosion caused more chaos than damage, but Optimus knew the aggressive human had to be stopped. She was still standing there, clearly on the attack and was reaching into her bag for something else, probably another weapon. While her attacks wouldn't kill him, they could kill or seriously injure the soldiers from NEST. To protect the humans, they had to neutralize the threat without hurting the female…and he knew he couldn't do that.

"Lennox," he said quickly, seeking the Major out in the mass of the shouting humans. Perhaps if they could get her out of the way, it'd be safe enough to face the Seeker—

And then, the person he least expected to react acted.

"RACHEL!" the Seeker bellowed. He lashed out with his hand—Bumblebee yelled out in warning—but the Seeker carefully grabbed the yellow-headed human under the arms. He pulled her back toward him, optics trained on her. "Cease this!"

"THEY'RE GOING TO KILL US!" she screamed, thrashing. The Seeker put her down and she tried to move back in front of him, eyeing the NEST group with contempt. "They're Autobots, they're Autobots, look at their chests—!"

The red and black mech hissed lowly—the first sound he had made yet—and sank down into a defensive position, edging back towards "Rachel" and the Seeker.

"Ve should go, ve should really go," he was growling, wide optics never leaving Optimus. "Go find others, now, now, now—"

"I can't Goddamn move, you moron," the Seeker hissed back. He wrapped his hand around Rachel again, crouching lower on his knees to see her face. "Stop attacking. Stop it! You're going to make it worse!"

"Are you just going to let them shoot you? ! Kill you? !" she demanded. She yelled and focused on the NEST group again. "What the fuck are you looking at? ! You want to hurt them, I'll fucking kill you—!"

"Who the hell are you, lady?" Lennox demanded, stepping forward. He had his guns trained on the Seeker, who was now sending him his own look of wary suspicion. "Calm down—we won't shoot unless you do something else stupid."

"Fuck you!" Rachel yelled, completely unafraid of the guns pointed her way. The Seeker moved his hand again, shielding her.
"Do not shoot. We mean no harm. She means no harm," the Seeker said, not pleading, but rather, stating. He seemed very guarded. "We are lost, so we thought you were enemies. Please, don't shoot."

"Ve should run, run, run," the red and black mech kept whimpering. He was clinging to the Seeker's wing with one hand.

"Shut up, Wildrider!" the Seeker snapped, but he let the mech cling. Rachel had stopped screaming and was now breathing heavily, staring at the NEST group with fear and contempt.

::What's happening, Prime?:: Ironhide asked over the comm. Optimus stared out at the three figures in front of them, not quite sure how to answer.

With the humans pointing their weapons at all three of them and the mechs keeping the Seeker in their weapon sights, the strangers seemed content to sit there harmlessly. The girl had calmed down slightly and the Seeker seemed intent on keeping the peace.

Optimus frowned. "Who are you?" he asked, tilting his head.

The Seeker looked at him, not flinching for a second. He then looked down at Rachel and Wildrider, considering.

"My designation is Thundercracker. I am a Neutral defector," he said carefully. His voice was deep and gravelly. "We are all Neutrals." He pulled Rachel closer to himself, gazing up at Optimus, gauging his reaction.

Neutrals? Here? Optimus didn't know if he could believe it, though it was possible. Still, a Seeker Neutral was alarming. It could spell a trap… but for some reason Optimus didn't think so. His companions were strange—Wildrider was clearly glitched and Rachel was a human. Not particularly common for a Decepticon to take on these types of companions and protect them even, Optimus thought, grave.

Strange indeed.

"I am Optimus Prime," he said, aiming to introduce himself and the others to show good will. He had a feeling there was quite a story behind the appearance of these Neutrals and it would be much easier to understand what was going on if he could have their cooperation.

"I know who you are," Thundercracker interrupted suddenly. He paused, hesitating. "…I don't know why you are here, though."

Lennox kept his gun pinned on the Seeker's chest. "What is that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

Thundercracker ignored the human. Instead he looked up at the other two mechs behind Optimus. He wasn't afraid of them, but he was disturbed by something. "You are Ratchet and Bumblebee," he told them, inclining his head as he clearly went over something in his own processors. "I know your faces and names." He glanced back at Optimus with increased wariness. "But… you're dead."

Optimus stared back. "…What?" he asked, more surprised than offended or confused.

For a moment, the Seeker almost looked scared. "Optimus Prime is… dead," he said haltingly. He shook his helm slowly. "You have all been dead for many years. I don't understand."

The look of discomfort in his optics was believable and real. What Optimus couldn't shake the feeling of was not distrust, but a wave of confusion and shock. Dead?
"You have heard wrong then," Ratchet said after a moment of stunned silence passed, humor hiding behind his words. His optics scoured the kneeling mech. "What's wrong with you?"

"We were attacked by enemy drones and I took damage," Thundercracker said, reluctantly. He glanced down at his legs. "It is mostly hydraulic damage, but my movement has been limited."

Bumblebee, for once, used his damaged voice to ask, "Enemy drones? What drones?" He tilted his head in deeper confusion.

The human, Rachel, scowled. "The drones," she replied. She had no fear speaking to the mechs; clearly she had been around them for some time. Her look of suspicion melted into one of confusion when no one reacted to her odd response. "You know… the drones."

Optimus stared at her. "…I am afraid I don't know what you mean," he said carefully, watching their reactions intently.

Thundercracker hesitated again, optics narrowing. Rachel and Wildrider wore similar expressions, exchanging a quick, uncertain glance.

"Where the fuck is this place?" Rachel said quietly, her eyes wider than ever.

"How did you get in here?" Lennox suddenly demanded. Optimus was a little relieved to see the humans weren't pointing their weapons so fiercely now; perhaps they could escape this without bloodshed of any sort.

Wildrider shifted uncomfortably. "Ve fell," he stated. His accent was difficult to place. He shied away from Optimus and Bumblebee's stares, peering up at them and then glancing away quickly. Ratchet was more interested in the damaged Seeker, naturally.

"From where?" Optimus asked, resisting the urge to glance upwards.

Their own scans and alarms had only picked up the mechs when they had appeared on the ground—not while they were in the air. It was as if they had sprung to life out of the forest itself. If they had fallen from a ship, that would explain some of it, but not the spontaneous appearance. The human with them complicated the situation even further. Even if there were a reason for a human civilian to be with any Cybertronians, she clearly hadn't survived a fall from a high orbiting ship, or even a lower altitude parachute drop from a plane. And everything about her seemed wrong. Why was she there? How had she come to be with former Decepticons? And what drones were they talking about?

"Do you know where you are?" Lennox prompted. He lowered his gun completely, but he radiated the sort of passive-aggressive control that came with his rank and job. "This is a secure base. You shouldn't be here."

Thundercracker stared at him. "We realize that," he deadpanned. For a mech in his condition and position, he seemed strangely calm. He looked back at Optimus. His optics were such a strange sight, with their glowing green color instead of Decepticon red. "We ask for peaceful interactions. And I … have one more request."

Optimus nodded. "What is that?"

Thundercracker glanced down at Rachel and Wildrider before hesitantly looking back at Optimus. "Have you found any other strangers?" he asked, that response giving them all more information than just a request. There were more of the unknown survivors, which had been obvious from the other alarm signal, but none of them had considered what that actually meant, until now.
Ratchet blanched. "How many are there of you?" he asked, voicing the question that must have occurred to all of them.

The three strangers looked at each other, probably silently trying to figure out how much information to give them. Thundercracker looked back at Optimus and wore a guarded look.

"Ten," he said. For a moment, his voice seemed to dip lower, colder. He kept his optics firmly on Optimus' however. "There are ten of us."

Ten? Optimus didn't try to hide his shock. That was more than their Autobot numbers totaled here on Earth. He prayed they would all be "neutrals" as well, though his fears made it difficult to believe they could be that lucky.

"Ten mechs?" Lennox asked, alarmed. The human soldiers did not look pleased by the news and neither did Ratchet and Bumblebee.

"Mechs and humans," Rachel admitted. "There are three more humans." So that made it six new mechs then. Good.

"Where the hell…" Lennox began, before stopping himself. He turned to Optimus, wide eyed. "What do you make of this?"

Optimus stared back, thoughtful. "I am not sure, my friend, but if we can find these others, perhaps we can—," he began.

Across the valley, the sound of plasma cannons and gunfire broke out, shattering the calm silence. Optimus whirled around in alarm.

::Ironhide, report!::

"What the fuck was that? !" Rachel blurted. Wildrider whined and ducked lower. Thundercracker loomed up, looking to the east, ignoring how Bumblebee fixed his cannons on him again. The humans also raised their weapons, keeping the three strangers covered while organizing themselves to begin to move out.

::Prime!:: Ironhide shot back, sounding stressed. ::Get the frag over here—we have company!::

Suddenly, this did not seem like it was going to end in peace.

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Vortex knew many things about surviving and fighting. This knowledge, these skills had kept him and others alive many times in the past, though he would never openly admit he was concerned for anyone outside of his own self. He was no longer a solitary mech, however; he was part of a new Gestalt, as Wildrider insisted on calling it. It hadn't been made on Cybertron in an Iaconian lab, however. It had been made on Earth and was completely Earth in substance and character. And that had been all right for the last ten years.

It still irked him in the back of his processors, however, when he immediately reacted in ways that would have been embarrassing more than a decade ago, such as placing himself in between a threat and one of his less-able teammates. He still did it, though, even when the attackers turned out to be three powerful looking mechs and seven humans armed to the teeth.

"Get back!" Vortex snarled at Barns the second that the largest mech began to transform, the others following his example. He fired off warning shots, which weren't aiming for any target specifically.
Barns obediently scrambled out of the way, pulling his pack onto his shoulders and getting ready to make a run for it. The moment he was behind him, out of the range of fire, Vortex felt better.

Well, he felt better until he saw what had to be the largest plasma cannon he had ever seen pointed at his faceplate.

"STAND DOWN!" the large black mech roared as he fearlessly took steps closer to their location.

Vortex had long ago stopped using his brothers' reactions and emotions to guide his own actions. Swindle never would have faced off against an Autobot—yes, they were Autobots, those three—that size or with that kind of weaponry, he would have found some way to escape. Brawl would have attacked the Autobot, just for the thrill, plasma cannon or no. Blast Off and Onslaught… in a situation like this, surrounded by fully fueled and heavily armed Autobots, alone with no sign of backup… they would have immediately surrendered, knowing Decepticon command would negotiate for their release if it were necessary. But Vortex wasn't Onslaught anymore, or Swindle or Brawl or Blast Off. He was Vortex and Vortex had every reason to fight for his survival.

Behind him, another good reason to fight gripped his own weapon tightly and started to pray out loud.

"Autobots!" Vortex snarled back before powering up his own weapons. He didn't care who he had to fight and kill to survive, to make sure that Barnaby Rancourt survived.

"We will kill you if you do not stand down!" one of the dark-skinned humans shouted. Vortex glared openly at the humans, taking in their strange appearances warily. Where the frag they'd come from and what they were doing there, he had no idea.

The Autobots spread out in front of him, protecting the humans and forming a line of attack. Vortex braced himself. He couldn't fight them all, but he wasn't going to go down without a fight. His weapons whined louder.

Silently, he hoped Barns was ready to run—

::Vortex!: he heard someone shout over intercom, causing him to freeze in shock. ::Stand down!:

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Jazz ran through the forest without caring if they ran into a pack of drones. He had to find his family, all of them. He had to find Rachel and Thundercracker and make sure they were okay. Until then, nothing mattered at all. The gunfire was bad because it meant violence, but it also meant at least some of his friends were alive. It also meant that their lives were in immediate danger, however, so he ran as fast as he could.

He would not lose another friend. Not today. Not after Goddard, after Wheeljack—

"Less than a mile," Arcee said loudly as she raced next to him on her single wheel. A few yards behind, Bluestreak was hurrying with Kass and Danny in his hands.

Jazz kept his radar on and tried to extend the field as much as possible. They had to find their friends, all of them, but they had to be careful not to just run into a battle blindly. He had no fraggling clue where they were or who Vortex was fighting. From the sounds alone, he could tell it was a bigger crowd than just the helicopter.

His fears were confirmed when he broke out into a thinned area of trees that hung on a hillside. The drop was steep and from their location, Jazz could see a crowd of people below. He crouched
immediately and surveyed the situation. It did not look good; the firing had long since stopped, but he could see Vortex pointing his weapons openly at a group of at least ten people. Most were humans, but Jazz could easily pick out three Cybertronians. Not good, not good…!

Behind him, Arcee skidded to a stop and pulled up with incredible stealth. Bluestreak finally appeared with the two humans and peered downward in shock at the incredibly uneven standoff below.

"It's Vortex!" Kass gasped. She scrambled to climb higher on Bluestreak. "Ohmygosh, Barns!"

Jazz desperately searched the crowd and found the brown haired human ducking behind Vortex's left foot. Oh, Primus, that wasn't good. Vortex was a damn good mech when it came to the humans, but with those three other mechs pointing their weapons at them both, one accident was all it took. Jazz began to power up his own weapons, ready to leap in. They had more mechs on their side, he reasoned; they had to intervene and get out of there ASAP—

"Wait!" Arcee said sharply. She grabbed hold of Jazz's shoulder and stared out with bright, wide green optics. "Jazz—look!"

Leaning over the edge, Jazz peered down obediently. He wasn't sure exactly what had caught Arcee's attention now. All he could recognize were Barns and Vortex; he couldn't see anyone else from their group. The humans were all strangely well equipped, but unfamiliar.

And then he saw the mechs.

One giant, black-gray in color. The second, who was snarling rapidly at Vortex in Cybertronian, red and cocky. The third, blue, unfamiliar, but obviously on the same team as the other two.

It was the first and second who Jazz recognized.

It was the first that Jazz was quite certain he had buried forty years ago in dead American soil.

"…Oh, Primus," Jazz whispered as his spark sputtered and flailed. Behind him, Bluestreak tried to get closer to see.

"What is it?" the gunner asked, concerned.

Jazz gaped openly down the hill. He couldn't believe his optics. He had—he had to have lost his mind. This—this—wasn't—

"Is that… Ironhide?" Arcee asked, just as stunned as he was.

"No. It can't be…" Jazz dared to lean closer over the edge, his optics scouring every inch of the image before him. It had to be an illusion. It couldn't—

They—

They were dead. Ratchet, Ironhide, Optimus, Bumblebee—they were dead. He had—he had buried them all. He had been the last.

"But he's dead," Kass whispered. She remembered the names. "I-isn't he?"

"And Sideswipe," Jazz said, voice warbling. He could tell from the swagger, the red paint job. Sideswipe, on Earth? What the frag—

Arcee made a strangled whining sound as she edged closer to the scene as well. "It is Ironhide," she
gasped. She sounded torn between terror and elation. "Oh, by Primus—it's him!"

"But he's dead," Jazz said, feeling utterly lost. Everyone was dead.

"But he's not!" Arcee replied, her voice strangled. She grabbed the tree next to her and held on, as if she were going to fall forward if she didn't have the support. "Oh, Primus. Primus."

Jazz wanted to scream Ironhide's name and run down there and just—touch them all. Just to see, to see if this was real. All he wanted was a confirmation that it was real. He didn't care how or why—they were alive and he could see them again and—

"We have to get them out," Kass interrupted shrilly. She was not swayed by the emotion of seeing long-dead comrades, but Jazz could see her point clearly.

The thrill of seeing Ironhide alive was quickly extinguished when he realized Ironhide had plasma cannons pointed directly at Vortex and Barns.

There was no time to figure out how to fix this. Vortex looked ready to fight or flee, and he couldn't run with Barns there, so fighting it was. But he'd lose and Jazz would be forced to watch two more beloved lives be lost. He glanced and saw Danny was finally somewhat coherent as she gazed down and was looking at Barns with a mix of hopelessness and fear.

Jazz braced himself and looked back at the fight below, his spark torn. There really wasn't any other option, he realized, no matter how much it hurt. He had to choose a side and he did. Knowing Ironhide and Sideswipe were the opposing side changed the situation though… no amount of rushing in there would save Vortex and Barns—both of those warriors were in a class of their own. Jazz thought quickly.

They had no choice. Jazz recalled Vortex's private comm. and hoped the Autobots wouldn't pick up on it.

::Vortex, stand down,:: he ordered quickly.

::Jazz!:: Vortex visibly recoiled and glanced around wildly now. He grew even more agitated.

::Where the frag are you? !::

Jazz tensed up. ::Above, about half a klick. Don't show them where we are, we need th' advantage,:: he said, hoping the other mech would listen.

Thankfully, Vortex did not look up at their location. He did seem calmer now, which was good.

::There are Autobots down here,:: he growled. ::I have Barns. Where is everyone? ! Are they with you? ::

::Just me, Arcee, Kass, Danny and Blue so far, unfortunately.:: Jazz heard Sideswipe and Ironhide discussing something about finding other 'NEST' teams, whatever they were. ::I know they're 'Bots, but keep calm. They ain't gonna kill ya if ya surrender.::

That made Vortex sputter. ::Surrender? !:: They hadn't had to surrender to anything in almost thirty years collectively, mostly because their usual enemies didn't seem to have anything but "obliterate" in their vocabularies.

::You have Barns I' think of.:: Jazz shot back, leaving no room for debate in his message. ::If you attack them again, they might hit Barns.::

It was a low blow, an underhanded way to get cooperation, but it worked. Vortex physically
shivered as he held back his aggression. ::Goddamn it!:: he snarled. Then, to Jazz's relief, he transformed his weapons and held shaky hands up in the air.

Jazz sighed, grateful. ::Stay calm an' let them take you where they will. We'll follow an' if it gets bad, you bet your aft we're coming t' th' rescue. For now, we follow with th' advantage,:: he said quickly, as the dark-skinned human leader conferred with Ironhide. Grimly, Sideswipe and the unknown blue mech each took a single step closer, weapons trained on Vortex, the promise of retribution very clear. Vortex openly snarled at them, though it was probably at Jazz, too. ::Fer Primus' sake, Vortex, they could have th' others. We need t' follow.::

Vortex clearly did not like the plan, but he didn't have much of a choice. ::Fine.::

Watching the scene unfold carefully, Jazz hated standing by as Vortex and Barns, who startled the humans when he appeared unexpectedly from behind Vortex, were herded forward with weapons trained on them. It took everything he had not to intervene.

::Keep the comm. open,:: Jazz said, standing up more to watch them leave. ::We got your six, mech.::

Vortex growled audibly over the link as Sideswipe directed him to walk in front of him, hands still raised. ::You'd better.::

From the looks of it, the Autobot forces were headed back to a base. Jazz's audio receptors couldn't follow all of the conversations filtering up, but he could tell that there were other 'Bots and they were headed to an actual base. That made him feel incredibly uneasy as he watched the back of the caravan disappear into the trees. He stood up, knowing every second counted.

The other four with him were waiting anxiously for some sort of directive. "What now?" Kass asked, wary. Danny had buried her face into her backpack with her shoulders hunched.

"We follow 'em," Jazz said firmly. He stood up and fixed his optics on the path that led down to where the caravan had gone. They had to follow discreetly. "We find out where th' others are an' we find out where th' frag we are."

Arcee didn't look happy, but Bluestreak and Kass nodded in agreement. Danny, however, continued to look out at the departing soldiers with fear. Jazz moved closer to her, wishing that he could offer her more than just words for comfort. She would need a lot more than that. He reached out and gently touched the top of Danny's head, causing her to flinch.

"Danny, I know two o'those mechs," he said, speaking as soothingly as possible. She looked up at him with shining eyes. Jazz smiled back. "I worked wit' em a long time ago. They're Autobots, Dan. They ain't gonna hurt Barns or Vortex while they got 'em in custody. But we don' know the situation, so I need ya to stay wit' us, stay alert, in case we got to move fast. Okay?"

Hesitantly, Danny nodded. Kass pulled out some water for her to drink and, after Bluestreak set them on the ground, helped her shoulder her pack, speaking to her softly and this time getting a faint response. Jazz turned back and watched the Autobot ensemble leave with Vortex and Barns in tow. It wasn't much of a plan, but given the personalities involved, it should work.

He prayed it would.
End Chapter Four.

If you're confused, it'll get explained in clearer detail soon. Or as much as pseudo-science can be explained.

Notes:
-No island base? Of course not! :D The island, Diego Garcia, will be appearing later, don't worry. Just wait a bit. They have multiple bases in this story: one on Diego Garcia, this one in California, one over in Germany, and another in the Middle East.
-"Klick" is a military term for approximately one kilometer, or 0.62 miles.
-Yes, Sideswipe and Jolt are from the ROTF cast list. My cast list for this story is much larger than the second movie's, however. Also, no creepy/racist/evil twins in this story either, thankyouverymuch.
Chapter 5

Although well versed in how quickly a situation in wartime could change, Optimus Prime was, for the first time since coming to Earth, truly surprised by the day's events. He had expected a mundane afternoon as NEST prepared to go for a routine scouting expedition the following week. In the evening he would have had a teleconference with his liaison in Washington. The NEST troops were scheduled for some night infiltration training against Ironhide, Sideswipe and Jolt—he had thought about joining them. It was frequently rather boring around the base, not that he would ever complain about a Decepticon-free day, of course. But he often participated in training exercises, just to get the energon pumping.

Yet here he was, heaving a half-paralyzed Seeker across a section of an American national park in probably the most surreal caravan of human and mech soldiers and potential prisoners he had ever witnessed.

Belatedly, Optimus realized his day was probably going to end even more weirdly than that.

"We're still about half a klick from the last check point," Lennox said to Epps over the radio as they trudged onwards.

The mechs had remained in their bi-pedal forms to keep an eye on their three captives. Although he looked terribly maintained, Wildrider could transform into his vehicle mode, a dented sports car missing nearly all the original paint. But the inclusion of the jet in their entourage prevented this option for travel. Thundercracker, a Seeker and potential undercover Decepticon spy, could not be allowed to overfly their base, mapping its locations and analyzing their security nets. Still, even if he was a friendly, he was too damaged to transform. He was also too damaged to walk unaided.

Luckily for the Seeker, there was one mech present who could support the Seeker's weight.

Unluckily for him, that mech was Optimus.

::Ironhide would fry his circuits if he saw you now, Prime,:: Ratchet teased.

Optimus tsked and didn't give him the benefit of a response. Thundercracker had not liked the arrangement either and shied away from the Prime's touch warily. However, he was the most obedient of the prisoners and wordlessly accepted the help as they made their way back to the NEST compound.

It was odd to consider the Seeker the least of their worries, but the mech that Ironhide's team had captured had been the most violent so far. Well, outside of the female human they had with them. Both she and Wildrider were Optimus' main concern. Lennox picked up on that also and focused most of his attention and men on those two loose cannons.

"Where are you from?" the soldier asked, glancing at all three to keep the question open for any of
them to answer.

"Europe," Thundercracker replied, unemotional. It was unsurprising that he was the one to speak up. "French Alps."

That made all of them pause. Optimus took a moment to double check that his processors hadn't made an error and he had heard the name of the mountains correctly. "What?" Lennox demanded, stunned.

Rachel, undaunted, sent the Major a strained look. "You heard him, GI Joe," she snapped.

Thundercracker rumbled against Optimus' chest and sent her a glare. "Cease the attitude," he ordered. Rachel scowled more, but said nothing.

"You take orders from a Seeker?" Optimus asked, looking at her as they walked.

"Orders?" Rachel repeated. She barked out a laugh and actually grinned, the change in her behavior oddly sporadic, even for a human. "Fuck that. TC isn't my boss."

Thundercracker sighed. "Consider it a suggestion to keep you alive," he said. Optimus hid his smirk behind his mask. He found Thundercracker's patient way of dealing with his wayward human reassuring. Not for the first time, he found himself wishing that the war hadn't driven faction against faction. The Seeker seemed liked a mech he would enjoy knowing better.

Rachel scoffed again. "Right. Well, don't bitch to me when they try to scrap you two. And then shoot me."

"We're not shooting anybody," Lennox said, glaring back at her. "Your friend is right. Quit the attitude. You're already in trouble."

"Oooh," the red-and-black mech in front of them crowed. He leered back at the human soldier with a crazed expression that threatened to turn violent. "So scary. I am unused to tough humans."

"Can it!" Thundercracker shouted, startling Optimus. The jet strained as he stumbled to get up the slight incline, his injuries obviously hurting him. "Don't get fragging cocky with the people holding weapons on you, moron."

"Like throwing rocks at the drones," Rachel offered. She, unlike her larger friend, had no trouble moving over the terrain. She seemed dirty and thin, but was apparently in great shape for a civilian.

Wildrider paused and seemed to think about that. "Hmm. That was not good idea, yes?" he said, thoughtful.

Thundercracker groaned. "No, no, it was not. So stop it."

That ended the comments from both Rachel and Wildrider. Interesting. Optimus was glad to see the final checkpoint coming up on the path. He wanted to be able to sit them all down and discuss everything. He had no idea where they had come from or anything about their group dynamic, but it was definitely intriguing.

"Ironhide and Epps got the other two inside already," Lennox announced.

Thundercracker physically flinched. "Who?" he demanded, looking directly at the soldier. Lennox, though he did seem intimidated by the height difference, bravely stared back.
"We found two more of your friends," he said. "Another mech and a human."

Rachel exhaled and Wildrider suddenly seemed antsy again. "Who?" the unstable mech demanded, almost turning around. Bumblebee made a sharp sound and pushed him forward across the threshold of the airfield. "Is it Danny?"

Optimus wasn't sure who that was, but the idea of two more unknowns pressed heavily on his processors. "Let's find out," he offered, adjusting Thundercracker's arm around his shoulder. They made slow progress across the field, but due to their mutual size, the smaller mechs and humans kept equal pace with their steps.

The jet hanging onto him made another rumbling sound. "Thank you, Prime," he said bluntly.

"For what?" Optimus asked, turning his helm to face him.

The jet glanced his way. The green optics were eerily unfamiliar. "Not killing us," he replied, though there was more to it in his voice.

Optimus shook his head and kept walking. "I could do no less," he said simply. "I do not know anything about you or your companions, but know that we will do nothing unprovoked to harm you. You have my word."

The Seeker kept his emotions guarded at all times, but the tension in his frame seemed to dissipate just a little more.

"We'll see," Thundercracker muttered. He looked up at the hanger door, where the others were waiting. He was incredibly tranquil for a wounded mech, Decepticon or Neutral.

Optimus sincerely hoped that they could get the answers they sought with that same sort of composure. They would soon find out, regardless.

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"Name?"

Barns sighed as he walked calmly after the two soldiers he'd been told to follow. The man next to him, a tall African-American, had been talking erratically into his walkie-talkie for the last half hour. Before that, they had attempted to get Vortex to speak to them, but Vortex was just as cooperative as ever, refusing to speak at all. Now their captors had turned their attention to Barns, who was far more patient.

"My name is Barnaby Rancourt," he said. He knew his accent must have surprised the Americans, so he added, "I was born in Normandy, France. The city was Rouen."

The soldier next to him nodded. "My name is Lieutenant Epps," he replied. Barns had to up his speed to keep up with the long-legged man as they marched across what had to be the most intact military base Barns had ever seen. "Who's your friend?"

Barns glanced over at Vortex, who was being flanked by the large black mech and the red one. "His name is Vortex," he replied, looking back at Epps. "He is harmless, I assure you."

"Speak for yourself!" the red one barked. He pointed his weapon higher at Vortex and Barns held his breath. "He's got Decepticon all over him."

"He is neutral, as am I," Barns replied quickly, almost stumbling. He gave Epps a pleading look. "I
beg you, do not harm him. He is not a Decepticon. He is merely trying to keep me safe."

"How the hell did you get here?" Epps demanded, ignoring his plea. He grew angrier. "This is a secure and above-top secret compound. If you ain't with the Decepticons, why the hell are you with an alien?"

"He is neutral," Barns said, desperate. He stopped and looked at the largest mech. "Please, please do not shoot him."

The blue mech made a scoffing sound. "Just keep moving and we'll talk about who's gonna shoot who," he said. He looked over at the red mech who kept pointing his guns at Vortex and frowned. "Yo, cut it out, Sideswipe. He's not going to take off, so stop charging your weapon."

"Friends?" Barns repeated, struggling to keep looking up at the mech and follow Epps at the same time. He looked at Vortex, whose visor had narrowed dangerously after the other mech had spoken. "Ah, who—who are you?"

The black mech seemed to consider the question carefully. "I am Ironhide." He nodded at the blue mech who had chastised Sideswipe. "This is Jolt. We are Autobots."

"I figured," Barns said, grinning weakly. "How do you know about the aliens?" Epps broke in again, looking frustrated. Barns guessed it was because of them intruding on the camp, but he couldn't be sure. They entered a large airplane hanger. Everything was so clean and well maintained. He had no idea where they were anymore.

Barns stared at him in confusion. What an odd question. "I assumed it was general knowledge," he replied awkwardly. He glanced at Vortex again, who was unhelpfully quiet. "Uh."

Epps scowled and stopped shortly in front of a large container just a few yards from the hanger entrance. "Let's re-phrase that," he said. "How the hell did you meet this dude?"

"He saved my life," Barns said. He nodded at Vortex. "My life and my friend's. He has traveled with the rest of us ever since. He is a good mech."

"You're awfully quiet for a good mech," Sideswipe quipped, looking pointedly at Vortex in suspicion.

Vortex glared at the other mech. "Perhaps I am just tired of dealing with half-bit, trigger-happy morons," he snapped. Barns closed his eyes. *Mon dieu, ceci est mal."

"Vortex," he began heavily, frowning at the helicopter. "Please."

The helicopter looked away, his visor almost permanently narrowed as he surveyed the area they were in. Barns didn't know what to make of it personally. There were many people running around and there were so many machines and metal containers. It was so clean. He couldn't see any civilians, only military uniforms, so perhaps they had found an honest-to-God rebel base.

Or something. Barns couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something huge about the situation. It didn't feel right, any of it, and it had nothing to do with the less-than-kind welcome they
had received.

"Where are we?" he asked, glancing around. He saw that Epps had disappeared, already walking off somewhere else. Before he had the chance to ask someone else, he heard the distinct sound of mech feet walking and then—

"Barns!"

Barns turned and gasped. Thundercracker was unmistakable, even when flanked by other large mechs, including a large red and blue one that was physically keeping him on his feet. Beside him, Wildrider and Rachel were walking under their own power. Wildrider was the one who had shouted and Barns couldn't help but grin.

"You are all right!" he exclaimed, walking back over to them hurriedly. He couldn't spot any of the others, but even one more friendly face was enough to lift his spirits.

"Hey, you're alive," Rachel said, grinning weakly as they met halfway.

Barns smiled back and embraced the blonde woman. "Good to see you," he said, releasing her. He turned and saw Wildrider. "Wildrider!"

"Barns," Wildrider replied, whining loudly. He crouched lower and grabbed the human up, Barns expecting it. "No damages, yes?"

"Hey!" someone yelled behind Barns. He tried to turn to see who it was, but he figured it was a human. "Put him down!"

Wildrider openly snarled, aggression returning instantly. He drew backwards, holding Barns protectively to his chestplate. Thundercracker rumbled dangerously, trying to pull away from the red-and-blue mech, who reluctantly let him go. One of the new human soldiers had spoken and all of the soldiers reached for their weapons.

"Everyone calm down," the unfamiliar giant ordered. His voice was like a rockslide to Barns' ears. He had to be their leader, at least of the mechs.

Barns turned to Wildrider, who was still growling. "Put me down, 'Rider," he said calmly, as the mech looked back to him with wild optics. "It is not polite here, I think."

He tried to joke, just to keep the other mech calm. It didn't quite work, but Wildrider seemed to comply with the request anyway. When he turned around, Barns saw more mechs arriving. There was a neon green one and a bright yellow. Both were Autobots as well and none of them looked happy to see Vortex there.

"You okay, Vortex?" Rachel was asking. She walked up close, ignoring the suspicious looks sent at them from the human military. Vortex visibly brightened and crouched to meet her. She knocked her hand against the back of his, grinning. "Nice job getting captured, bolt-brain."

"Like you did any different," he shot back. His visor was no longer narrowed now, however.

"Have you seen anyone else?" Thundercracker broke in, looking at Barns and Vortex. He seemed desperate.

Barns shook his head. Vortex visibly hesitated, making them all look at him, but after a moment, he shook his head.
Creaking as he moved closer, the taller red-and-blue mech stood over them. He seemed far friendlier than Ironhide or the humans, but once he retracted his battle mask, they could see a deep frown etched into his metal face.

"My name is Optimus Prime," he began, looking at Vortex and Barns specifically for introductions. "Your friends claim to be neutrals. Are you?"

"Yes," Barns said, nodding. Part of his mind stumbled when he heard the mech announce his name. If he wasn't mistaken, that name—

No. It belonged to a dead mech. Jazz's stories couldn't have been exaggerated that much.

Optimus Prime looked at Thundercracker. "Who are you?" he asked.

"We're just neutrals," Thundercracker replied, shaking his helm. He was still having trouble standing. "We are not your enemies."

"There are no such things as neutral Seekers," Ironhide shot back. He had become more agitated once Thundercracker had shown up.

Thundercracker glared back at him, but started to tremble more, clearly in pain. Barns saw energon running down the back of his one leg and wires were torn up on the other.

"TC, you need medical attention," he said quietly, though he was sure that everyone heard him. Good. He sought out the big Autobot's optics and gestured at the wounded jet. "Please. If you are Autobots, then you must help. Surely you will not let one of your own kind suffer openly in front of you."

He stood his ground, even when the huge Autobot's attention fully landed on him and Sideswipe and Ironhide made rumbling sounds of disapproval. Barns wasn't afraid of them, simply because he knew they wouldn't hurt him. He also knew he would not back down even if they did. He wasn't going to allow them to bully his friends, outnumbered or not.

Luckily, the Autobot promise of justice seemed to be true. The neon-green mech stepped forward and knelt down to look at Thundercracker's leg.

"He's right, Optimus. The field repair I made has split."

"Ratchet," Optimus nodded at him. He inclined his head toward the injured jet in front of them. "If you would, properly repair the immediate damage."

"Why? !" Sideswipe blurted. Optimus sent him a firm look and the red mech backed down.

"We are not savages, Sideswipe" Ratchet supplied, shaking his helm. Apparently, he was their medic. He motioned at Thundercracker. "Help him to the repair bay, Prime, such as it is in this scrap heap."

Thundercracker flinched and his optics went down to Rachel immediately. The human smiled tightly at him.

"We'll be okay," she said, shaking her head. "Get your ass fixed."

"I will go with him," Barns offered, ignoring the strange looks the Autobots sent his way. He moved closer to Thundercracker, who was leaning heavily on the tall Autobot as they followed Ratchet. He sent them his own patient glare. "As if we will be separated," he scoffed.
Wildrider growled at the thought. Ironhide also growled, but he seemed insulted now. "We aren't the Decepticons," he said, defensive.

"Yet you captured us," Rachel shot back, crossing her arms against her chest.

The blond soldier who had shouted at Wildrider glared at her. "And you threw grenades and invaded a top level security net," he snapped.

Barns gave Rachel a pained look. "Grenades? !" he hissed. "Rachel…"

Rachel sniffed indignantly and didn't deign him an answer. Barns grimaced. Perhaps leaving her alone with Vortex and Wildrider, of all mechs, was not a good idea.

Ratchet didn't give him a lot of time to recant his offer. He walked as briskly as he could away from the main group, Thundercracker and Optimus following him, with Jolt on their tail, guns trained on the Seeker as if he expected him to do something dangerous. Barns jogged after them, and caught up before they entered the section of the building that clearly housed their repair bay. He kept his attention focused on Ratchet and the Autobot leader, however; while it was true he wanted to stand by Thundercracker as an ally, he also was aiming for a coherent answer to his own questions.

"Where are we, sirs?" he asked, glancing at the green mech. Politeness helped.

Ratchet frowned down at the human. He didn't seem used to dealing with people, despite the fact they were surrounded by soldiers. "We are at the joint Autobot and United States military base in Eastern California," he replied simply. He almost seemed amused. "Surely you know the layout of the United States."

Optimus staggered a bit when Thundercracker stopped walking. No one noticed Barns, who had stopped also. Ratchet turned and saw the two captives standing there and was startled by the expressions both were sending his way.

Barns gaped at Ratchet in a mixture of horror and disbelief. The mech stared back in surprise, but Barns was still struggling to understand the last thing he had just heard.

"The United States? !"

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Rachel wasn't sure what she had done to deserve a lot of the things that had happened to her throughout her life. If there was a God, she opined, her persecution definitely showed that he was an asshole. But if there wasn't, then she was sure that she had been born to be miserable, as if she had some innate skill or destiny. Sure, she was alive—but sometimes, death seemed like a haven.

"For the last goddamn time, Wildrider, if you go near that door, I will let them shoot you," she began, pointing menacingly up at the red and black mech, who was leaning dangerously close to the hanger door, the only exit in their make-shift prison, "and no one would blame me because you decided to be fucking stupid!"

Wildrider, who had turned around at her talking, pouted, or at least, as much as a mech could pout. "I vant out of here," he whined, reluctantly sliding back toward her and Vortex, who had taken the strategic position right in the center of the room. He could see the door, and although not comfortable with the small hangar, he wasn't backed into the corner.

"So do I, but we can't go anywhere until we have a safe way out, and we don't," Rachel replied, frowning. She did move over and pulled herself up onto his legs, sending him a sympathetic look.
"Just be on your toes, 'Rider, and we'll be okay."

"I have no toes. I am doomed," Wildrider exclaimed. Rachel laughed and rolled her eyes. The mech looked vindicated that he had made her laugh.

Vortex, however, looked even more ready to explode. He didn't like cramped places, so it was no wonder he hated being in the freaking storage closet. More than that, his Decepticon programming was probably making it impossible to relax inside of "enemy territory."

She couldn't blame him for a second. They had taken their gear, their weapons—she was starting to feel a bit lightheaded whenever she thought about it. They had absolutely no way to defend themselves outside of diplomacy. She was counting on the fact their captors were Autobots to keep diplomacy on the table. They liked that over guns, or at least that's what Jazz and Wheeljack had told them—

Rachel stopped.

Everything… just stopped.

She had no idea if they were alive. Rachel inhaled slowly… carefully. Jazz was, most likely. If she and the other four had made it, surely the others had as well. It was only logical. And—maybe—Wheeljack—

…Who the hell was she trying to kid? Rachel laughed, the sound just a puff of air. She couldn't think about that now. They had to focus on surviving. She had to focus on surviving. There wasn't time for —for regrets.

Or tears.

Rachel took one deep breath. And then another.

*Keep calm.* She closed her eyes and just breathed. *Keep… calm.*

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Vortex watching her from across the room. She stared back at him, trying to keep her emotions in check.

The helicopter noticed the tension in her body obviously. He had learned to pick up on human moods much better over the last few years. "…You okay?" he asked, peering at her warily.

"No," she replied. Rachel gripped her head tightly and stared down at the floor. "Fuck no."

Everything was so wrong now. They had to find the others and get out of where they were. It didn't matter if some supposedly dead leader was suddenly up and walking around. It didn't matter to them. They had to keep moving, because after everything that had happened, if they just rolled over and died now—Wheeljack and his actions—his stupid, stupid choices—would be for nothing. Rachel couldn't let that happen. It would kill her.

Beneath her, Wildrider suddenly tensed up. "Vortex," he said loudly. He sounded abnormally severe.

"What?" Vortex asked, narrowing his visor in a frown at the other mech.

"Signal 421, channel AR-90," Wildrider rattled off, shocking Rachel. He was staring out at the wall with a stunned look on his faceplates. He sounded more coherent than she had ever heard from him before. "What the frag am I looking at?"
Vortex flinched backwards. "What the hell are you—," he began, but suddenly cut himself off. His visor widened to its maximum width and his entire posture changed as if he had just let his jaw drop open behind his mask. "Whoa."

Alarmed, Rachel stood up. "What is it?" she asked.

"…I…" Vortex shook his helm slowly before looking down at her in shock. "It's the Internet."

"Bullshit," Rachel snapped immediately, her heart pounding. The Internet had been offline for decades before she was even alive. There was no freaking way it was working, not even in Africa.

"No bullshit," Vortex replied. He reached up and gripped the side of his helm as he continued to access the mysterious channel. He flew back against the wall. "Holy frag. It's—!"

"No," Wildrider interrupted, finding the same data. He started to snarl, his voice rising to an angry shout. "No, no—that is impossible."

"What? !" Rachel exclaimed, desperate. She hated, hated, being kept out of the loop. "What is it? !"

"The date," Vortex croaked. He was still accessing the Internet judging by the distant look in his line of sight, but…

Rachel watched him with as much trepidation as she would a drone. Part of her wanted to tell him to shut up, right now, but another part of her screamed for answers.

"It's August," Vortex said, his words rendering her speechless. When he spoke, he looked as though he was staring down a horde of drones. "It's August… 2009."

It was then that Rachel realized that yes, their situation could in fact get so, so much worse.

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Never in a million years would Jazz have thought he was doing what he was currently doing. He'd never dreamed they would meet up with so many Autobots in a single location again. And he'd certainly never expected that those Autobots would take the rest of his team prisoner—after all, it wasn't like they didn't have more important enemies to fight, enemies that were common to all of them. Sure, he had participated in tons of jailbreaks in his time, rescuing Autobots from Decepticon bases and ships. He just never believed he'd be breaking into a compound that he was rather certain belonged to the Autobots.

None of his ideas mattered though, not in the face of reality. These Autobots had taken part of his family to their base as prisoners—Vortex and Barns—and as the ranking former-Autobot in the group, it was his responsibility to make it clear to these Autobots that these people were his. His friends, his family… his responsibility. And no matter what this Earth threw at him, he wasn't going to leave without them.

His plan was simple, maybe too simple—follow the Autobots to their camp and use his mad interpersonal skills and insider knowledge of the 'Bots to negotiate for his family's freedom. The first step was to find the main road that Ironhide had taken Vortex and Barns down and follow it. It was a basic dirt road, but it was smooth and well cared for, and would lead them exactly where they had to go. Jazz had crept ahead of the rest of his team, temporarily disabling the alarms that were rigged all over the woods, particularly near the road.

There was something off about these Autobots' security net, however, Jazz noted. They clearly expected to catch the majority of their intruders on or near the road. He figured that Vortex must
have landed practically right on top of a tripwire to have triggered it so quickly. Puzzlingly, this system was also designed primarily to catch individuals on the ground—with hardly any sensors more than fifteen feet high, it wouldn't successfully detect the flying drones. Confused, Jazz led his team parallel to the road, toward the location showing the most signs of life. As they got closer and the trees thinned out, he realized they were facing a larger problem than just three mechs and a few humans.

This wasn't just a camp; it was a permanent base, complete with buildings and power and communications. Jazz wasn't sure who was in charge of it or why it was there; all he knew was that he had to get inside of it, because that's where Vortex and Barns were, possibly the rest of their group as well. He and his crew rested until almost dusk, hoping that twilight would help with the element of surprise—and then they moved. Jazz ordered the mechs to transform, to give them speed and maneuverability and the humans protection. With Kass and Danny inside Bluestreak, Jazz and Arcee sped forward towards their goal.

He saw a barricade up, with three humans stationed there. They waved at him when he was about three hundred meters away. He didn't stop. He didn't care that they were left alive and mainly uninjured to raise the alarm, because by the time they did and the next point was ready for them, they'd already be there breaking through.

::Are you sure this is a good idea?:: Bluestreak asked over the comm. as they broke through the second barrier. Jazz could hear an alarm ringing across the forest as news of their arrival spread.

::Well, we'll find out if it is soon enough.:: Jazz said, trying to be upbeat. Inside his chest cavity, however, his spark was pulsing wildly. He had no idea what to expect when they got through.

He needed to find mechs, not humans. Jazz ignored their yells and didn't stop when they fired on them with guns. Bluestreak comm'ed that he was fine, but at the third checkpoint Jazz threw himself into a powerslide, drifting between Blue and the humans that were firing on him before turning forward again. Catching up, he passed Bluestreak and Arcee to lead the way directly into the center of the base. The only thing between them and their friends now were a couple of chain-link fences. Easy enough.

Arcee, on the other side of Bluestreak and the girls, didn't like the plan whatsoever. ::We should have tried sending out a message to the Autobots.:: she insisted, following him regardless. ::This is not an attack!::

::No, it ain't.:: Jazz agreed. He revved his engine as they were nearly upon the flimsy metal gate the humans were trying to secure. ::But it sure as slag ain't a pleasure visit, so let's show them their prisoners' got friends!::

He slammed into the barrier and didn't care about how it scraped the remaining paint on his hood or dented the metal of his bumper. The entire base looked like an abandoned airfield that had been turned into a military compound. He could only see humans outside the hangars, but now that they were there on the grounds, Jazz fully expected Autobot company shortly.

Sliding to a stop, Jazz transformed and gazed out at the base. No one was firing at them, yet, but he could hear military chatter being tossed around over comms in preparation for a counter attack. Jazz stood his ground and waited, knowing the humans knew what he was. They would wait for mech back up.

"What's the plan? You never told us a plan!" Kass was chattering inside of Bluestreak. She was trying to hang out the window, since Bluestreak wasn't letting her out of the car door.
Jazz shook his helm at her. "Stay in th' car. If this goes south, Blue'll get you two outta here," he said. Kass hesitated, clearly not liking that plan, but she didn't have much of a choice. Jazz turned back around and frowned at the chaos. Arcee had transformed as well and rolled next to him, radiating nervous tension.

They did not have to wait long, as Jazz had predicted. From the third hanger door emerged three cars. One of them was Ironhide, the other the unknown blue sports car from Vortex and Barns' capture and the third was a bright yellow and black sports car that was uncomfortably familiar.

Oh, Primus. Bumblebee. Jazz almost fell to his knees, but forced himself to be strong, for just a little longer.

The incoming mechs transformed and immediately had their weapons trained on the five survivors. They probably didn't know the humans were there and it took everything he had not to jump in between them and Bluestreak on the off chance they started firing. Instead, he raised his hands in the air in surrender, as did Arcee.

"Move and we'll shoot!" the blue one yelled. His hands were emitting bright blue sparks.

Jazz nodded and kept his hands raised. Bluestreak remained in car form. Inside him, both Danny and Kass raised their hands, gazing out at the new mechs with shock and uncertainty.

"Who the frag are you? !" Ironhide bellowed, plasma cannon pulsing dangerously. He pointed it at them without an ounce of fear.

For a second, Jazz almost thought Ironhide didn't know him. But then he remembered he looked like slag and was probably looking nothing like Jazz. Shifting on his legs, Jazz faced his old friend and decided to face his ghosts directly.

"Heya, Ironhide," Jazz began, grinning openly. He waggled his clawed hands in an awkward greeting. "Fancy meetin' ya out here."

It took them—oh, maybe five seconds. Ironhide had hesitated at the familiar greeting, but it was Bumblebee who had reacted first. He made a strangled sound, surprisingly not in English or Cybertronian. Clearly his voice was still damaged. He looked between Ironhide and Jazz with wide optics.

Ironhide saw Bumblebee's reaction and then turned back to face Jazz. He stared at the smaller silver mech unknowingly before he abruptly looked like he had just taken a missile to the chest.

"By the Matrix—!" he started, lowering his weapons in his shock. Ironhide gaped at the mech in front of him. "Jazz? !"

The shock and fear told Jazz a lot of things. He wasn't sure what to expect from any of his old friends, but he now knew that they were not expecting him. He forced himself to keep grinning, if only to prove it really was him.

"Th' one an' only! I hear ya got a few of my friends," Jazz continued, pushing his luck. "So, ah, care t' let us in fer a bit?"

Ironhide just gaped at him and Bumblebee also lowered his weapons, speechless for other reasons beside medical. The blue Autobot looked confused, but Jazz couldn't blame him. Ironhide looked back at Bumblebee and they seemed to decide whether or not to let them inside the base.

Primus help him, they did.
A/Ns:
-Again, I stress, don't take things for granted with their scientific revelations. When Barns figures it out, so will you.
If it wasn't for the fact that Ratchet was an Autobot, and therefore probably just waiting for a chance to slag him and his friends, Thundercracker might have liked him. He could take a verbal punch—and return it with gusto—and if the legends about the Autobot CMO were correct, he could also dish out physical ones without a problem. It was rather intimidating to be repaired by him; Thundercracker didn't want to admit to anyone that it was reassuring to have Barns perched on the repair table, watching the proceedings carefully. The Prime had returned to his duties, leaving them with the medic and the blue Autobot guard, Jolt, Thundercracker remembered briefly.

"You act like I'll stab him in the spark," Ratchet groused as he sealed one of the several split energon lines behind Thundercracker's knee. The jet was feeling more than just a little exposed lying on his chestplates as the medic worked.

"We take care of each other," Barns said simply, not looking at the medic. The human looked rather ill and Thundercracker knew it wasn't because of the spilt energon. He felt somewhat ill himself.

If they were actually in the United States, they should have, would have, been seeing far worse than a hand-me-down military base. The forests would have been dead. The sky would have been grayed out and bleeding. America had received the worst of the bombings. Thundercracker knew that because he had helped to do it.

They could not be in America. It was impossible.

"About that…" Ratchet murmured as he worked. He glanced at the human once before looking back at his tools. "My commander and the humans are a bit confused."

Barns drew his jacket closer to his body; the base had air conditioning of all things. "About what, if I may ask?"

"The Seeker and the other two mechs are Decepticons," Ratchet began.

"Were," Thundercracker and Barns interrupted at the same time. Barns looked at the jet and chuckled. Thundercracker just sighed softly to himself.

Ratchet glanced at the two of them before starting the repairs again. "Even if you are Neutrals, I have to ask, how did you meet?" he asked. He spoke calmly, moved with a cool composure, his entire demeanor reassuring and unthreatening; he was very good at this.

Barns hesitated. "We met on the road," he said, choosing his words with care. He had always been the best, most eloquent, of the human speakers. "Vortex saved my life, and my friend's, and a short
while later we met the larger group. Thundercracker and Wildrider were there before us."

"We chose survival over pointless factional differences." Thundercracker added, shuttering his optics.

"So you have met Autobots," Ratchet surmised. He sounded neutral, but he was still pulling at the seams of their conversation for more clues. Thundercracker wasn't certain they should tell their current hosts the truth yet or not. He didn't know what to believe or trust anymore.

Barns sighed and rubbed his hands together. "I suppose," he said, briefly glancing over at the other mech in the small workstation. "Ah, you are all Autobots, then?"

"Yes." Ratchet sounded amused. He finished sealing the lines on that leg and started working on the other, where the paneling had been ripped open. "You were expecting, what, exactly?"

"I have no idea," Barns admitted. "I am not even sure I am awake right now." He laughed. "I am feeling quite like Alice."

"Who?" Jolt asked, peering at the human in curiosity. Barns faltered when the unfamiliar mech spoke.

"Euh, a human storybook character," he replied. He caught Thundercracker's optic and smiled gently. "We are down the rabbit hole, I am afraid."

Thundercracker rumbled. He wasn't overly familiar with the story, but he got the sentiment. Everything was becoming quite overwhelming to deal with.

"Finished," Ratchet announced after a few minutes of welding Thundercracker's plating back together. He stood back and gave the jet a wide berth to sit up properly. "You've got damage on your back and wings, but it appears to be healing fairly well."

The medic didn't comment on the large numbers of older scars crisscrossing the blue mech in front of him, many of which clearly ran deep into the airframe. From the loss of systems his own medical scans had reported, it was clear that Thundercracker had been through many, many years of battle. And during that time, he had been repaired competently, but not by a medic familiar with Seeker anatomy.

"You said drones did this?" Ratchet asked suddenly.

"Yes." Thundercracker adjusted the hydraulic settings on his lower limbs and was surprised to find that he didn't have to compensate much. Usually when his energon lines were repaired, Wheeljack had him adjust the settings so the pressure of his hydraulic system didn't blow the new lines. Clearly, Ratchet had repaired him in a different way that didn't require so much adjustment.

This repair was a good job. …Too good of a job.

"What?" Ratchet asked, noticing his growing frown.

"Nothing," he replied. He paused, looking over at Barns, who was also watching curiously. Thundercracker clenched one of his hands into a fist. "It... it's different with a real medic."

Ratchet crossed his arms against his chassis, looking intrigued. "Who did you have before?" he asked.

For a moment, he almost said the name. He stopped himself, though. "TC," Barns said quietly. His
eyes were darkened now.

Thundercracker looked at him before looking away, back at the Autobot medic. "Right." The jet stood up, not oblivious to the fact that Jolt had taken his weapons out again. It was too dangerous to be separated from the others for long. "Take us to the others."

Ratchet still looked bemused, not intimidated by the larger flier at all. "You—," he started, but cut himself off with a curse as he recoiled away from him. "Slaggit!"

"What?" Barns asked, alarmed as he stood up. Thundercracker retrieved him, now very wary of the Autobots in the room. He hadn't done anything to incite that kind of reaction, but if Wildrider or Vortex had, they had to be ready for retaliation.

Shockingly, it wasn't those two loose cannons. "We just found your slagging friends," Ratchet snarled. He pushed past Thundercracker, leaving Jolt to handle the prisoner detail. "By the Matrix, this is getting out of hand!"

*Friends*—that meant Jazz. Hope surged in his spark and Thundercracker didn't care if he looked happy in front of the unfamiliar mechs. If Jazz had the other missing members of their group with him, then that meant they were finally back in one place, together, again. And that fact, no matter what happened to them all afterwards, was far better than being apart.

He hurriedly followed after Ratchet, with Jolt actually having to jog keep up with the larger two. Barns was still perched in Thundercracker's hands, looking eagerly down the corridor they took back to the main hangar, his eyes seeking out their friends. When they got back to the hangar, Thundercracker saw Vortex, Wildrider and Rachel standing near Sideswipe. Ratchet had disappeared, but Jolt immediately took off after Ironhide and Bumblebee at some unheard command; a distant alarm bell punctuated the commotion outside. Something was happening.

"What is going on?" Barns asked quietly as the humans rushed about below them.

"No idea," Thundercracker murmured. He crouched and let the young man slip off onto his own feet as they approached their three companions. Wildrider had transformed into his car form for some reason, possibly because he felt safer that way, but Rachel and Vortex both looked up as the jet and Barns approached.

"You three okay?" Barns asked. Thundercracker stopped a few feet from the other group, nodding at Rachel. While none of them looked hurt, he was alarmed at how panicked both Rachel and Vortex looked. Before he could ask, however, they interrupted him.

"Listen to me, quick," Vortex said, moving closer than he probably ever had to the jet. Thundercracker forced himself not to flinch backward, but the helicopter didn't notice. His visor, narrowed and fierce, met his optics. "The Internet is back."

It took Thundercracker a klik to realize what he just heard. "That's…"

Vortex's visor narrowed even more if that were possible. "It's there, and guess what else?" he asked. "Today? *August 4th.*"

"But we left in February!" Barns gaped at the helicopter.

"—and the year?" Vortex continued, voice low. "2009."

Thundercracker stared at him. "That's… not possible," he said. He looked around the hangar, suddenly paranoid, afraid of all the humans and Autobots watching them. None of this was fragging
"Check it yourself!" Vortex hissed. He drew back more when he saw Sideswipe giving them a suspicious look.

"I—!"

Wildrider suddenly revved his engine. "What was that?" he demanded. Thundercracker listened and noticed the alarm had stopped. Wildrider lurched on his wheels. "Oh!"

Thundercracker understood why when, at the door, Ironhide reappeared. But it wasn't just him. He glanced backwards when he heard more mechs walking their way, but shouting drew him back to the door again.

"JAZZ!" Rachel yelled beneath him. "GUYS—!"

Thundercracker whirled around and saw what Rachel was yelling at—the others. Ironhide and Bumblebee were herding Jazz, Arcee, and Bluestreak, still in his car form, with Kass and Danny seated inside him, toward the center of the hangar. For a moment, Thundercracker almost forgot himself. He wanted to run forward, regardless of whether the Autobots would see it as an attack or not, and greet his mate and his friends.

"Oh, thank goodness! You're all all right!" Kass exclaimed, flinging open Bluestreak's door and running towards them. The humans could get away with it better than any of the mechs, anyway. She and Rachel met halfway between and hugged each other fiercely.

"Thank God," Barns echoed, rushing forward after Rachel, helping Danny from Blue's other door.

Wildrider, still transformed, zoomed across the empty hangar floor. Ironhide tensed, but Wildrider ignored him entirely, transforming daringly in front of the new group.

"EVERYVONE!" he screeched. He kept looking between all of them—from Jazz to Kass to Bluestreak to Arcee—to Danny. He froze on Danny and practically fell over her.

"DannyDannyDannyDanny—!"

"Are you okay? !" Jazz demanded, walking around Wildrider, giving him a worried glance and a pat on the shoulder. Thundercracker had moved over now and met him halfway.

"Yes. We're fine," he said. He reached out and grabbed Jazz by the shoulder, not caring if their hosts saw. "What about you?"

"We're fine!" Arcee answered, crouching lowly with the humans, who were whispering quickly with each other. Danny seemed to be talking as well, but she was hanging onto Barns now, face in the crook of his neck. Barns sent her a heartbroken look and embraced her.

"About fragging time you showed your afts," Vortex muttered. He did seemed relatively less edgy, now that they were all back together.

"Hey, you guys made it hard t' find ya," Jazz said, grinning. He radiated nervousness, however, and he crouched down next to Rachel. "Hey, shortstuff, how you doin'?"

"I thought you were dead," Rachel said, gritting her teeth. She was really fighting back tears now. She accepted his hand and wrapped her arms around it; the only hug either race could offer each other. "Asshole."
Jazz laughed as he stood back up. "Love you, too," he said, just as cheeky. He glanced around at their sorry looking crew. "Hopefully ya'll been behavin' fer our friends here?"

Vortex glanced between Barns and Jazz before looking over their shoulders at the group of mechs arrayed at the other side of the hangar. "Yeah. Speaking of them…"

Heavy footsteps on tiled floor were becoming too common for Thundercracker's tastes. He saw Ironhide stop short of their circle. "Prime wishes to speak to you," he said, acknowledging Jazz.

Jazz nodded and drew his shoulders back. Thundercracker watched him carefully as Prime approached. The jet could see Jazz's plating tremble ever so slightly. It wasn't that Jazz was afraid of Optimus. No, it was something else.

Turning, Thundercracker watched as the Autobot leader stared down at them all with a grim frown. He shivered just like Jazz did, because between them, they knew that the mech in front of them should have been dead. Thundercracker said nothing, leaving the talking to Jazz. He wasn't sure how much they could risk revealing. They had no way of knowing what sort of mess they had stumbled upon.

Optimus, thankfully enough, looked just as wary as they did. "Jazz… you are alive," he said. He looked like he was trying to remain as stoic as ever, but Thundercracker could see cracks of fear appearing in that façade.

There was a lot to learn from that one sentence, too. They thought Jazz to be dead, as Jazz had believed they had been dead. Thundercracker frowned deeply as he moved to stand beside Jazz in support. He had heard of Optimus' demise just like every other Decepticon on Earth, so he also was finding it difficult to believe the mech in front of him was actually there.

"I take it I've been dead?" Jazz asked, chuckling. He tucked his clawed hands under his arms, posture defensive. "Huh. Well, I ain't that surprised, t' be honest."

Behind Ironhide and Bumblebee, who were both ogling Jazz with similar looks of wariness, Ratchet burst through. He looked more agitated than he had when Thundercracker last saw him and he only grew tenser when he saw the ten survivors standing there. "What the frag is going on?" the medic blurted. His optics roved to Jazz, and if mechs had blood, Ratchet most likely would have paled. "Jazz…!"

Jazz grinned unhelpfully. "Hi, Ratchet. Miss me?" he asked sweetly. His laugh petered off weakly when Ratchet just stared at him with his jaw hanging wide open.

"How is this possible? !" the medic exclaimed, astonished as he took in the full image of the Saboteur. Thundercracker glanced down at Jazz; the silver mech was just smiling back at Ratchet, but his body was far more taut now, clearly on edge to be facing this former friend. How indeed.

While the moment was certainly strained for the Autobots who had known each other, the others in the room felt increasingly out of the loop. Thundercracker saw the human soldiers giving Optimus and Jazz odd looks, probably waiting for a chance to ask questions. Suddenly, Bluestreak transformed behind Thundercracker, the sound startling them all to turn to look at him, and he grinned excitedly.

"Ratchet!" he called. He walked forward, ignorant of how Ironhide and Jolt were sending him wary looks. "Do you remember me? I'm Bluestreak! I was with your squad for a little while on that energon mining base a few hundred vorns ago. Do you remember? I got into this big fight with Gears and Huffer and had to get my doorwings reattached and—!"
While Ratchet looked surprised enough to confirm Bluestreak's story, someone else spoke first. "Holy slag, Blue? !" Sideswipe blurted, stepping around Ironhide to get a better view. He gawked at the younger Autobot. "What the frag are you doing here? !"

"Huh?" Bluestreak stood next to Vortex as he peered at the other Autobot. Abruptly, he grinned happily again. "Oh! Sideswipe! I didn't even notice you! That's kind of weird, I guess, since you're bright red, but still! What are you doing on Earth? And where's Sunny?"

"What the frag are you doing on Earth? !" the red mech shot back.

Kass glanced over at Jazz, nervous. "I take it everyone knows each other?" she asked. Jazz chuckled, but there wasn't much time to explain.

With that, it seemed like Jazz's miraculous resurrection was overtaken by the others' presences there. Arcee rolled up and stared up at Optimus with a look of pure awe. "Prime," she began, practically bursting at the seams with joy. "It is so very good to be in your presence again."

"You are… Arcee," Optimus said, watching her warily. "What are you doing here? You are supposed to be on the Galaxus with Chromia and Elita-1."

Arcee hesitated, but she glanced back at her group of refugees. "I am with these nine here," she said. She held up her hands in an open gesture. "I assure you, Prime, we are no enemies of the Autobots."

"Speak for yourself," Vortex growled. Barns reached out and patted the irritated helicopter patiently.

Arcee ignored him. "Sir, how are you here?" she asked, staring at Optimus closely now. She shook her helm, disbelief growing. "How is… any of this possible?"

"And where are we?" Rachel asked, standing upright with crossed arms.

"This is the NEST base of operations in North America," Optimus replied, glancing her way before looking back up at the wall of new mech faces. He never stopped frowning as if he was facing something unfriendly. "While I believe that you mean us no harm… you have a lot to answer for. All of you."

"Well, sir," Jazz began, grinning broadly, "ask away." He hid behind that smile, but Thundercracker could easily see anxiety and exhaustion rolling off of his frame.

"First, do any of you need medical treatment?" Ratchet asked, interrupting the conversation. He looked specifically at the humans. "You have been injured," he said, eyeing Kass' bandaged arm.

"Naw, we got that all taken care of, right Kass?" Jazz asked, looking at her. She nodded, and Jazz looked around at the rest of their group. Thankfully, everyone seemed okay outside of Danny's emotional distress. As he'd said, Kass' injuries had just been a few scratches and he had helped Bluestreak patch up the superficial damage he had received in their escape from the drones.

"You all look like slag," Jolt said, bemused. After Bluestreak's introduction, the unease between the two parties had lightened considerably. Thundercracker was grateful they had the gunner with them; he had a gift.

Jazz effortlessly took the prompt to joke back. "Oh, I thought I was just smashin' under a layer of dirt an' rust," he said coyly. He glanced at Thundercracker and did his best impersonation of a wink. "It's all th' rage where we come from."

"And where have you come from? I expect a full explanation," Optimus said, still severe. He stood
back, jaw tense. "Something tells me that you have quite the story to tell me."

"Oh, Prime," Jazz began wistfully, "we have one Hell of a story t' tell, believe you me." His visor narrowed slightly, however as he peered up at the Autobot. "But ya can also bet that we're gonna get our answers, too."

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After reveling in the realization that the surviving members of his family were okay (he was not going to think about their eleventh missing member until he had the proper time to deal with it), Jazz was more than willing to do as NEST wanted. He was impressed by their professional attitude and he remembered how he had once been part of the same team, long ago and in another world it seemed. It was nice to think the organization had somehow survived longer than he had believed.

Unfortunately, there were a lot of things about NEST that bothered him. Such as Major William Lennox and Lieutenant Robert Epps, both men he had known and had helped bury. They shouldn't have been there any more than Optimus, or Ironhide, or Bumblebee should have been. Jazz waited though. He waited for answers, even though he knew at the moment, it was his turn to answer the questions.

Jazz wasn't a stranger to sit-reps, so he was more than willing to sit there in the empty hangar bay, his friends less-patiently sitting near him, as they waited for their unfortunate hosts to get their acts together. Something was seriously wrong about them being there and Jazz knew it wasn't just because they weren't in Africa. Everything was fragging wrong, honestly, but he wasn't going to panic. They weren't surrounded by drones, facing injury or death. There was no need to panic. Not yet, at least.

Optimus Prime in all of his healthy, undead glory was walking around the hangar, looking mildly impatient himself. After a few minutes of conversing with Major Lennox (*Primus Almighty*, that was the same freaking guy, wasn't it?), the Autobot leader turned back to the ten refugees seated before him.

"Apologies. I had to send for the human Director of Intelligence and our own intelligence officer earlier, and was receiving an update on their status. They should be here within the hour," he began, looking down at them. "They were in Washington discussing things with Homeland Security."

"No prob, Optimus. We ain't going no where," Jazz joked with a shrug. Optimus smiled and that made Jazz happy; no matter how odd the situation, Jazz was still the same mech the Autobots had known. At least Optimus recognized that.

"Feel free to start explaining any time," Lennox said, apparently not feeling the same sentimentality as Ironhide, Optimus, Ratchet and Bumblebee were feeling when they saw Jazz, who they apparently had thought was as dead as he had thought them to be.

Barns cleared his throat. "Well, first off, we're not from here," he said. "Obviously."

"Where are you from then?" Epps asked, glancing between the taller mechs and the human.

Thundercracker had no problem looking back at him. "Earth," he stated.

"This is Earth," Ironhide replied, glaring. While he sometimes sent Jazz a hopeful look, he didn't seem to like Thundercracker that much. Or any of the other ex-Cons. Jazz sighed.

"Yeaah, that's th' awkward part," he said, stealing the limelight to stop a potential brawl between the parties. He held his arms up in a shrug. "'T' be honest with you? We don't have a freakin' clue as t'
where th' hell we are, or how th' frag we got here."

All of the mechs from both sides had settled down inside the hangar. Thundercracker had seated himself on top of a large red shipping container, Jazz seemingly lounging beside him. The others were on the floor, resting against the container facing the Autobots. The humans had decided to take their seats on the mechs, both for the sake of security and for a better vantage point from which to interact with the new Autobots. Barns had chosen to sit on Wildrider's knee, but when he suddenly made a sharp gasping sound, every eye and optic moved to him.

"...The space bridge..." he started, brown eyes huge. Danny, next to him, looked at him uncomprehendingly.

Jazz doubted the human NEST soldiers knew what a space bridge was, but the Autobots at least reacted properly. "What?" Optimus asked, startled. "Where?"

Barns, looking pale, looked back at the Autobot leader. "The space bridge... we were trying to teleport down to Africa from southern France," he explained. "...There was an explosion. It... it's possible... something happened."

It was a weak explanation, but honestly all they had. Jazz frowned when he saw the NEST team look even more irritated by the vague response.

"Something?" Ratchet repeated. "Like what?"

"A rift," Barns replied, undaunted. He sighed and ran a hand through his dirty hair. "Not only were we teleporting against the laws of longitude, the machine was possibly destroyed mid-transport by the drones. We saw an explosion before we... 'ported. There is no telling what could have happened." He bit his lip before looking back at Optimus, perhaps with a little pleading slipping into his tone. "There is no way to know for sure now. But believe us—we come from Earth—at least a version of Earth."

Vortex hissed. "Or what was left of it," he grumbled. Rachel snorted.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Lennox demanded, glaring at the helicopter. "You guys are pretty quiet, but we're going to get to the bottom of this, mark my words. Or else, I'll let Simmons deal with you in a few days."

Jazz visibly grimaced and knew they had to avoid that scenario, even if he was only one from his group who knew how freaking awful the agent was. "There's nothin' else to tell you!" he said quickly. If these people didn't know about the drones, well, their story wasn't really understandable at all.

"How are you from an Earth, but not here?" Ironhide asked, crossing his arms against his chestplates. "And for Primus' sake, why are there Decepticons with you?"

"I am no Decepticon," Thundercracker snarled, voice louder than anyone else's had been. He loomed, even from his seated position. "Do not insult me, Autobot—you are already trying all of our nerves. And once the most patient of us relents, believe me—I will not hesitate to rip you apart."

Jazz knocked into him gently with his knee. "Well, that's playin' nice, TC, I'm so proud of you," he snarked dryly. He needed Thundercracker to back him up on the whole let's-play-nice plan.

Thundercracker snarled at him. "What if they try to kill us?" he demanded.

"We're not. We just want answers," Optimus replied, frowning deeply. "You say you are not a
Decepticon. What about the others?"

Wildrider's engines revved, earning him everyone's attention. "I am no Decepticon. I am Wildrider. Decepticons are dead. They are no more," he said, practically boasting. "Ve play nice, Autobots play nice, ve all live. And now, there are no Decepticons." He pointed at himself and then the other two ex-Cons. "Just Vildrider, Vortex, and Thundercracker." He hesitated under Thundercracker's glare. "Er, Boss-Mech."

"What do you mean, they're dead?" Ironhide sputtered. None of the NEST team seemed to believe that.

Jazz grimaced. "…This… isn't going t' be easy t' explain," he began, feeling intimidated by the task of doing so. He had nothing to go on for himself, let alone all of the already suspicious Autobots.

Optimus tilted his helm and looked down at the silver mech. "Try me," he said, patient, but leaving no room to escape the conversation.

Kass cleared her throat. "Excuse me, what year is it?" she asked quietly.

Perhaps it was because she hadn't spoken before or because she was human, but the sound of her meek British voice breaking across the room startled most of their audience. "What?" Ironhide barked. His gruffness made Kass squirm a little, but she kept up a brave front.

"What year is it," she repeated. She inclined her head. "Please."

Lennox hesitated, but answered, "2009. Why?"

Jazz could feel everyone in his group pause… and then look at each other with varying degrees of horror. He himself felt like purging.

"Holy fuck," Rachel seethed, her eyes wide. "You were right, 'Tex!"

"No wonder!" Barns exclaimed as he grasped the side of his head in shock. "This is before the attacks!"

Vortex looked ill. "How is this possible? !"

None of the NEST team were following their reactions well. "What are you all talking about?" Epps demanded, glancing between the panicked mechs and humans warily.

"…We're..." Jazz started, processors skipping. He shook his helm and tried to keep calm. "We're from th' year 2054 CE. '53 if you're really picky, 'cause I think my chronometer got screwed up awhile back." Oh, Primus. Oooooh, Primus, this was not happening…

His response gave the NEST team the chance to look like fish out of water. "…The future?"

Sideswipe blurted, almost scandalized. He rolled backwards. "You're from the future?"

"A future," Jazz corrected, shaking his helm firmly. He gestured at his chest in desperation. "Lookit me… you say I'm dead here? Well, you all are deader than dead in our world." He stopped, bracing himself as he gazed up at Optimus and Ironhide. "I saw ya die. All o' ya."

Not just the mechs, either. Epps, Lennox, Mikaela… oh Primus, where was she? Was Sam Witwicky still alive? Was Megatron? Where were the drones? Jazz gripped his helm, overwhelmed. Beside him, Thundercracker reached out and grabbed his shoulder in support.
"…Everyone?” Optimus repeated, stunned. He moved closer to Jazz. "All of the Autobots?”

Jazz shook his head slowly. "Everyone, Optimus." The sound of his voice, sad and serious, left no room for doubt in the minds of those who had known him. "The Autobots…there ain't any of 'em left. All o' us here… we're th' only ones we ever found over in Europe. Once found another Decepticon, but he didn't want t' play nice,” he said, chuckling weakly. He looked at his group and smirked. "We all needed each other t' survive, so we hung around. An' it's worked out pretty nice."

"Ve are family," Wildrider said, preening. "Gestalt." Ratchet sent him an incredulous look.

"But… if the Autobots are dead… what… what happened to Earth?” Lennox asked, stunned. For all of their defensiveness, this new group was definitely listening. Jazz had to thank them for that.

"It got slagged by Galvatron's pets," Vortex snarled, making Bumblebee jump. "As did the Decepticons. He slaughtered his own men—my brothers, teammates. All of them."

"Galvatron?” Optimus repeated, surprised. None of the Autobots looked like they knew the name either. Jazz wanted to scream.

"Oh, Primus." Jazz ran a heavy hand over his faceplates, feeling the weight of the world suddenly dumped on top of him. Jumping from the top of the container, he stood and faced Optimus, trying to get some semblance of control back in his crazy life. "This is gonna take a while t' explain."

The sound of a vehicle pulling up to the hangar interrupted him, and he was saved from having to explain anything more. In hindsight, he wished he could have just kept going.

"Save it, because Keller just arrived,” Lennox announced. "Here they are." Jazz froze when he detected a new energy signature approach and stop just short of the open doorway.

Wait…

Jazz whirled around in horror just as Optimus started to introduce the new arrivals.

No…!

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Optimus had been right to send for him, as the situation had quickly escalated from a simple security breach to something far more anomalous. His companion, U.S. National Intelligence Director John Keller, was not in a good mood during their four hour plane trip to the California base, which was very understandable. He himself felt ill as he reviewed all the available data that Ratchet and Ironhide had been forwarding to him during the debriefing.

Ten unknown figures, both human and mech, had arrived from seemingly—impossibly—the future. There were both Autobots and Decepticons in the mix, but all ten of them functioned as a solid unit. It was not logical, but then again, most things in war weren't. For the sake of security, they had to investigate this completely and leave no questions unanswered. A Decepticon plot was not an impossible situation.

"I swear, you folk just like to mess up my day. You've perfected it to an art," Keller was muttering as they headed across the dimming airfield toward the hangar.

He smiled thinly to himself as he allowed his colleague to lead the way. He was amused despite the building sensation of fear rising in his spark. "I apologize, Director,” he said. Keller just snorted and kept up his hurried pace.
They made a good team, politically speaking. He was glad Optimus had suggested he work closer with the human politicians, as they seemed to be growing warier of the Autobots day by day. It was essential that they know what their human hosts were planning, and interacting with them directly on a daily basis allowed him to advance the well-being of them all.

The hangar was large enough to accommodate the large number of mechs that now stood around waiting. But it seemed astronomically small when the two walked in and saw the faces staring back at them.

"Here they are," the human commander, William Lennox, announced, prompting the crowd to turn and face them. Most of the unknown ten stared at him, specifically, in unabashed curiosity.

"Director Keller," Optimus said politely, looking at the white haired human. He then turned and motioned at him. "Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to our own intelligence officer—"

That wasn't enough. He couldn't help but step forward and cut his leader off.

"Jazz," he said, spark trembling. He forced a professional attitude, however; this was no time to get caught up.

However, the object of his attention did not seem to believe that was the proper philosophy to follow. Jazz had turned when he'd entered hangar, and at the sound of his voice the optics behind his abnormally colored visor found him standing there quite easily. It was almost amusing, the range of emotions the saboteur went through in just a matter of seconds. Shock—elation—fear—and then utter horror.

Thundercracker, the Seeker, had also turned and was snarling, standing upright immediately. None of the other mechs seemed to react, though Bluestreak—yes, Bluestreak he recognized—seemed struck speechless with shock once he realized who they were looking at.

"Holy… slag…"

He turned back and saw Jazz staring at him. The emotion that lingered on the face plate of the silver mech was one he had not predicted: that look of horror. Part of him was disappointed… and part of him felt guilty.

"…Prowl?" Jazz asked.

Abruptly, all Hell broke loose.

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End Chapter Six.
- Why, yes, I am an asshole. :3
- In case you weren't aware, CE stands for "common era," another way to say AD for a year. I prefer CE and I think the mechs would, too.
- No, Keller is no longer Secretary of Defense. He moved out when Bush did in 2008, because the President is the one who appoints SecDef. However, since he pretty much is the only political liaison the Autobots are somewhat familiar with and vice versa, he got a new job. ;) "U.S. National Intelligence Director" is the same title that Charlotte Mearing has in DOTM, so just think of that as an example.
Chapter 7

Today was becoming Optimus Prime's least favorite day on Earth, ranking well below the night he had been forced to hide in some human's flowerbed.

It had taken both Ironhide and Jolt to successfully stop Thundercracker from lunging at Prowl and it had taken more effort to keep everyone from panicking as what started out as a simple meeting threatened to turn into a full out brawl between the refugees and NEST. Prowl had been utterly confused by the angry reaction from the Seeker and denied any wrong doing on his part, but Optimus knew his Intelligence Officer was not exactly up to par at the moment, emotionally speaking. Anything was possible.

He had taken Prowl aside and given him the strict order of not remaining in the presence of the refugees—Jazz included. Optimus felt guilty, knowing how much Prowl had missed him, but Jazz's reaction made him firm on the no-contact order. He had no idea what sort of background this Jazz had come from, and even if he had been with Prowl in his past like their Jazz had been, Jazz was not the same mech they had lost almost two years ago. Something about Prowl clearly set Jazz off in a negative way.

It was sad and disappointing for everyone. Optimus sent Jazz sympathetic stares from a distance as the saboteur attempted to calm Thundercracker down while looking just as distraught himself. He had hoped, in a selfish way, that this Jazz could be the Jazz they had lost so prematurely. It had been a devastating blow to all of them; Jazz had been their friend. This one seemed to be the exact same mech, but... but he could never conceive of a time when Jazz would have rejected Prowl, and certainly not in such a way.

They couldn't take anything for granted. If this Jazz was upset by Prowl's appearance, they had to deal with it. That wasn't their main concern, at the moment, however, so Optimus forced himself to remain focused on the real problem: the future.

With the refugees now wound up and looking for a fight (the Rachel girl and Wildrider were going to be definite problems if they didn't work something out soon), Optimus moved the officers and Jazz to another room just a few hundred yards away from the hangar. It was their impromptu situation room, so to speak, where they worked together with their human allies to investigate possible Decepticon sightings. It was surreal to stand there facing a mech they had all assumed dead, but Optimus braced himself as Jazz explained the situation in greater detail.

He told them, from what he could tell, everything. He started from the beginning, with his own personal history on Cybertron and then how he got involved with the Autobot retaliatory forces in Kaon when Megatron rose to power. He skipped most of the war for the sake of the humans present
(Lennox and Epps probably didn't have the time or patience to listen to vorns' worth of military activities), but Jazz hit many major facts that only Jazz should have known. Military codes, Special Ops strike orders, Autobot officer names and spy aliases—he knew all of that, including Operation AT-906.

"What is that?" Lennox asked, looking a bit harassed as he tried to keep up with all the information.

"It was the mission that sent us to Earth," Optimus explained. He glanced at Jazz, weary. "That is the title we identify your solar system with."

Jazz told them everything that the humans were present for as well, from Qatar to Mission City. He knew everything about the their desperate search for the cube, the flight from Hoover Dam and the fight in Mission City—until a certain point.

"Thing is, during Mission City, all o'ya died, 'cept 'Hide and me, from th' Autobot side," Jazz said, shaking his head grimly. "I take it that didn't happen here."

Ironhide frowned. "No, obviously."

"Well, for us, that was just th' start of the war on Earth," Jazz continued. "Though we didn' know it at th' time. Two years after that… Galvatron appeared an' so did th' drones."

He told them about his world, one that even Ironhide had the decency to shudder at. Everything about it seemed alien and far away. A nightmare, Epps muttered. The Autobots lost, but so did the Decepticons. Everyone on Earth was trapped by an unknown aggressor outside the limits of the atmosphere, but on the planet's surface, those that had survived the war had to outlive the drones.

Jazz told them of how he did that, though some of it seemed so farfetched, it was almost fantastical. Optimus didn't know if he could believe it, that a group of human, Decepticon, and Autobot survivors could actually work together. From what they witnessed just that afternoon, however, he considered the possibility that he should re-evaluate that disbelief.

"…an' that's everythin'," Jazz said with a heavy sigh. It was almost midnight by that point and he looked as tired as the human soldiers did. "That I witnessed, at least."

Keller, his eyes red from exhaustion, just stood there on the catwalk looking flummoxed. "But I don't understand," he said. "The drones—where did they come from?"

"Th' drones were made by Galvatron. He was Megatron until he was resurrected by a guy named th' Fallen," Jazz said, repeating earlier information. He shook his helm. "We don't know how, or why, but Galvatron… wasn't Megatron. More insane, if ya can believe it." Jazz's visor darkened. "He used th' drones t' kill everythin'. Not just Autobots or humans. Anythin' that moved."

"I don't believe that they alone could have ended known civilization," Ironhide said as he looked critically at the other mech.

Jazz smiled humorlessly. "I didn't either, until I watched it happen, 'Hide."

"And the Decepticons…?" Ratchet asked, hesitant. "They were also killed?"

"He turned on 'em around 2014. Wiped 'em all out, save for a sorry few that escaped, like TC, Vortex and 'Rider." Jazz looked over at Lennox and Epps, hesitating. "NEST… NEST kept fighting. Fer ten more years, until fin'ly I was the only one left. Lennox—you and Ironhide— and then… Mikaela."
"Mikaela Banes?" Lennox repeated, stunned. Behind Optimus, Bumblebee made a sharp sound. They all knew who she was; she had nothing to do with any of this, though.

"Yeah," Jazz said, nodding anyway. He suddenly smiled awkwardly. "She still around?"

Optimus glanced back at Bumblebee, who was very tense now. "…Yes. She is," he confirmed slowly.

"What about…" Jazz stopped himself. He laughed shortly. "Heh. I don't suppose Witwicky is alive, is he?"

Again, Bumblebee's engines thrummed quietly. Optimus glanced between him and Lennox, considering.

"He's fine," Lennox said, tearing his eyes away from Optimus to look down at Jazz. "He's the one who killed Megatron."

Jazz's visor widened in shock. "…What?" he asked, startled. "Really?"

When Optimus nodded, he didn't expect Jazz to start laughing, almost hysterically. Optimus looked over at Ratchet, concerned, but the hysteria was cut off shortly.

"Oh, wow," Jazz said, chuckling. He leaned against the wall and grinned over at the others. "Props t' him then."

Ironhide scowled. "How did Megatron die in your world, then?"

"Optimus. He sacrificed himself," Jazz replied. He frowned slightly. "Only me and 'Hide escaped Mission City, well, with 'Kaela and Lennox. The gov'ment stepped up fundin' fer NEST, an' we spent th' next few years workin' on gettin' Autobot reinforcements t' th' surface, coordinatin' wit' human operations 'round the globe. But wit' th' drones in the mix, we couldn' make any headway. Lost comms wit' the Autobots off Earth, then lost comms with th' other gov'ments. By 'bout 2020 we stopped seein' Decepticons in North America. From what I'm told, they were bein' killed off too. Coupla years after that, ev'yone was dead but me. I lost… lost Mikaela last."

He turned and stared at the door, where the other refugees were. "I met Thundercracker 'most fifteen years later, in Georgia. I hadn't… neither of us'd seen or spoken t'anyone in more 'na decade. Ran inta 'im again a bit later an' we decided ta team up, 'cause he was alone. All alone, like me," he paused. "An' bein' alone's a death sentence there. Picked Europe 'cause America was just a wasteland. Figured it couldn' be any worse 'cross th' pond."

"There you met the others," Optimus supplied, trying to get the timeline straight.

"Yeah. Rachel Cooper first. She's ours," Jazz said, suddenly rather defensive. He gestured at himself and grinned guardedly. "Me and TC adopted her, 'cause she was just a ten year old kid wandering around." He hesitated and added, "Wheeljack… and Danny were next."

Ratchet flinched. "Wheeljack?" he repeated, surprised.

Optimus saw Jazz draw back further, emotionally and physically. "Yeah," he confirmed, body gathering itself more tightly, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

"Where is he now?" Ratchet asked, not noticing or just plain ignoring the tension in the other mech.

Jazz's jaw clenched tightly. "He's dead," he said bluntly. He looked at the ground, slightly hunched.
"He's the one who built the bridge. He…"

He stopped talking and just stared at the ground, raising his clawed hand up to peer at in silence. Optimus waited patiently as the smaller silver mech seemed to conduct a mental battle with himself. The humans looked at each other awkwardly during the pause and Ironhide looked like he was going to snap at the mech to keep talking. Optimus would have stopped him, but Jazz broke the silence on his own.

"He stayed behind t' make it work," he said, picking up the conversation without a hitch. He made a high-pitched laughing sound. "Fragger didn't even tell us, 'til it was too late, that he had t' stay behind. Knew any one'a us woulda volunteered t'ake his place. Knew we'd never'a been able t'decide who it woulda been, that none'a us woulda gone." Jazz suddenly looked pained and glanced up at Lennox and Epps with a desperate expression. "Primus. Danny is gonna need so much help. Please keep an eye on her fer us, whatever ya do."

"We'll take care of her," Lennox said, surprisingly reassuring. "So you met all of these guys in Europe? Just wandering around?"

Jazz tapped his claws against each other nervously for a moment, collecting himself. "Yeah. Th' drones kept coming though," he answered. "Galvatron was dead by that point, most likely."

Epps made a humming sound as he leaned on the railing. "So why were the drones still there and killing people?" he asked, curious.

"Never did find out," Jazz said with a sigh. "They were like mad dogs off a leash, I s'ppose." His visor narrowed again. "They targeted anythin' that moved. They hate life."

Optimus frowned. "But you ten managed to survive, correct?"

"There were about twelve of us over th' years. But yeah, we got by. Th' kids lived offa canned goods an' what we could forage. Somehow 'Jack figured out how t'make an energon converter, which saved our afts," Jazz replied. "We, ah, lost one o' th' humans about six years ago. He was Barns' guardian. But th' kids were almost grown up at that point, so it wasn' too bad." He inclined his head at the door. "We met 'Rider in Poland and a little later we met Barns and Goddard and Vortex. Found Arcee in Slovakia somewhere. Kass Hall and Blue were th' last ones t'join us. They survived a massacre 'bout five years ago where Kass lost everyone, her whole family." A shadow passed over his visor and he grew reserved again. "We've all lost everyone."

The loss in his tone was unmistakable. For all of his behavior that reminded Optimus of the officer he had had to bury… this new mech was far more broken. "I am sorry," he said, meaning it.

That earned him a half-hearted shrug. "Ain't yer fault, Prime," Jazz said, pushing off from the wall. He smiled wryly at the Autobot leader. "I can't tell you how good it is t' see you alive, Optimus. I… I gave up hope when I had to bury 'Kaela." He looked at the ground with a grim frown. "Earth was as good as gone th' second we came here."

Meaning the Transformers. Optimus stared at the smaller mech and mulled over that comment. He sometimes thought the same, whenever he considered the odds humanity had, now that Starscream was out for possible revenge. This Earth may have avoided the loss of the Autobot forces so early on in the war, but that didn't mean it wouldn't end up the same as the one Jazz came from.

"We're not now," Epps interrupted, frowning. "Not here."

"Right… I guess not," Jazz agreed, nodding. He crossed his arms pointedly. "Heh. It's almost unfair.
"You guys are lookin' pretty good compared to us. Weird."

"What is?" Optimus asked, surprised.

Jazz met his optics with a severe look that was unfamiliar. "If we're from th' future an' this is the past, why th' frag is everythin' different?" he demanded.

Ratchet hummed. "You may have altered the time stream with your presence," he suggested, voicing the option Optimus had been considering.

"No, no, that ain't it," Jazz replied with the shake of his helm. He suddenly looked agitated as he looked at each person present. "Everythin's wrong. By this point in mah timeline, y'all are dead an' Starscream's already come back." Jazz paused. "Wait, where is he? Is he still alive?"

"We assume so," Ironhide supplied. "We haven't seen any real 'Con activity since Mission City."

That made Jazz almost wilt in relief. "Good. Good," he murmured, looking at the door and then back at Optimus. "You guys might have a better future than we had. Ya already got more'n three times's many Autobots as we had at this point." He offlined his visor, as if pained. "Primus. I wish this had been true fer us, too."

It felt almost cruel to send the mech back out and let him remain on the outside as the rest of them continued to talk. Optimus didn't know what their next step was going to be, however; he didn't even know where to begin. And Jazz was clearly eager to return to his friends in the next hangar, departing without a backwards glance.

"It doesn't make sense, Prime," Ironhide said almost immediately.

He sighed and touched his hand to his faceplates like the humans would. "I know."

"If they're really from the future… what the hell does that even mean?" Lennox sputtered. He looked increasingly distressed after Jazz left, probably only realizing the gravity of what they had just learned then. "What the hell do we do?"

"I don't know," Optimus said, grave. "They are not aggressive, not now. They pose us no active threat, I'm certain of it."

"But what do we do with them?" Keller countered. He looked just as tired and run down as everyone else did. Epps and Lennox were probably ready to keel over from exhaustion and stress. "We can't turn them loose on the streets!"

Ratchet moved closer to Optimus, optics narrowed. "That really is Jazz, Prime," he said. "You saw how he was with Prowl." It had been a negative reaction, but the familiarity was still there. After everything Jazz had confirmed, Optimus knew it could only be his old Special Ops officer.

"I saw…" he replied, looking away. "Their issues can be sorted out later. For now, we deal with them as they are: unknown, posing no immediate threat, but worthy of observation." He looked around the room at the NEST members there and forced himself to remain on track. "I don't believe they are working for Starscream, but I know nothing more or less. Clearly they will have to remain here until we know more, and we must all be vigilant about security until we are convinced of their true allegiance."

"Perhaps we can sort the matter out with a deep cortex scan," Ratchet offered. Bumblebee made a wincing expression, but Ratchet pressed on. "I can see if they're telling the truth and if they're hiding anything else."
Lennox rubbed the back of his head, frowning. "Which one would you crack open though?" he asked.

"Well, they seem to look to both the Seeker and Jazz as mutual leaders," Ironhide replied, looking at the door pointedly. "One of them would be the best bet." Optimus had to agree.

Ratchet nodded and, with no one voicing another opinion, headed toward the door. "Let's see which one will volunteer for the job, shall we?"

Ratchet wasn't sure what to expect from any of their guests; there were times they reminded him of actual innocent refugees on Cybertron, before Megatron's efforts made it clear there were only two sides available to choose from. There were other times that Ratchet sincerely wondered if this was a Decepticon ploy, with the more volatile members of the group lashing out spontaneously. The human members of the group made him hesitate on that opinion, though; they could not be so defensive of actual Decepticons, unless they too were being duped.

When he approached the hapless survivors, he wasn't surprised to find most of them in recharge or asleep. The humans refused to be separated from each other or the mechs; the mechs acted like they would physically retaliate if a separation was forced. It was sad looking at their pathetically grouped recharge pile in the middle of the hanger bay, but it wasn't like they had anywhere else to put them. The sight of the humans curled up inside both Bluestreak and Wildrider was odd.

The only mechs online when he walked up were Arcee, Thundercracker and Jazz. When he prompted his question of which of them would volunteer for the scan to prove they weren't lying, Thundercracker almost shocked him with an immediately agreement. He argued that Jazz needed the rest more than he did. Jazz was reluctant to let the jet go off with Ratchet and Sideswipe alone, but they didn't have much of a choice.

"You were quick to volunteer," Ratchet commented calmly as he watched Thundercracker yet again climb onto his makeshift exam table. "I suppose it's better that it was you." He ignored the glare Thundercracker sent him. "Because you are the former Decepticon and not Jazz," he added.

Thundercracker scowled as the medic shuffled about him. Sideswipe remained on duty at the door, alert. "He could be lying about who he is," Thundercracker said, almost goading him into a response.

That did make Ratchet hesitate for a moment. "...He is Jazz," he replied quietly as he retrieved his tools. "I know... knew him." He had also helped to lay the corpse in a makeshift catacomb back at Sector 7's old base. Once they got the Ark down from the moon, they could properly bury him. Then again, it seemed surreal to bury one Jazz with another walking around alive.

"Hmm." Thundercracker glared up at the ceiling.

"Besides, both of you act as the co-leaders of this group, correct?" Ratchet continued, trying to remain focused. He stood next to the Seeker's head, looking down at him. "How that works, I don't think I'll understand."

Thundercracker's optics went to his for a brief moment. "We don't either," he admitted wryly. He looked back at the ceiling, a port opening on his neck obediently. "Just do it, medic."

Ratchet did so, connecting their processors through an interface cable. He was allowed through several heavy firewalls and was swept up in unfamiliar coding. He had never done a scan on a Seeker's mind before; the technology was far more advanced than that of a grounder's. The closest
thing he could think of that compared to this was the Aerialbots’ programming.

He went through all short-term memory files and saw a chaotic stream of emotions attached to the last forty-eight hours Thundercracker had witnessed. He found a surprising amount of rage and fear surface in the more recent hours, which was odd. Ratchet wasn't sure what could have caused that sort of reaction, until he realized the time frame it was attached to.

"You don't like Prowl, oh?" he asked quietly, almost without realizing he had spoken out loud.

Thundercracker snarled. "Frag off." That memory was abruptly sealed off.

Ratchet pressed onward with the scan and did his best to sort through the countless memories, some being thrown his way specifically. They were all informative and all crucial to understanding what they had been told earlier. The drones, the teamwork, the space bridge, Wheeljack—it was all there. It was all true.

Unfortunately, all the memories did was confirm Jazz's story. Normally, that would have been a good thing.

For Ratchet and the NEST team awaiting the news, this was terrible.

Ratchet stiffly disconnected himself from Thundercracker's processors and removed the cables. He stood back, trying not to seem as tense as he felt. Thundercracker sat up slowly and looked over at the medic, waiting. The whole thing had taken less than thirty minutes, but after seeing what amounted to a human life-time of horror, Ratchet felt as though vorns had passed.

"You weren't lying," he managed to say.

Thundercracker's optics narrowed. "Obviously."

Something else in his processors had startled Ratchet. It was less troublesome than the drones or an apocalypse, but it had been almost equally disturbing. Thundercracker noticed and seemed to brace himself.

Ratchet considered not mentioning it, but a pressing question had been unanswered, even as he trailed through Thundercracker's mind. Sideswipe was still at the door, but Ratchet supposed they would all be hearing of this eventually.

"...I will not comment on the nature of your relationship with Jazz..." the medic began carefully, sub-spacing the cable. He ignored how Thundercracker clenched his fists and Sideswipe gawked. "But I have to ask."

Thundercracker waited, impatient. Ratchet met his optics pointedly; he had to know. He wasn't sure why, but he didn't feel right leaving the question unasked. His curiosity and sudden defensiveness for the Autobot members of the refugees flared.

"If you ran into the Decepticons now, would you consider the option of rejoining them?" he asked, getting to the point. "If you had the opportunity, of course."

That was the biggest security risk they had now, since they had proof that there weren't any premeditated plans in store for betrayal. That didn't rule out the option that the ex-Decepticons could turn on them all if Starscream returned or they decided to go back to their former team. They had blank slates, essentially, and Ratchet couldn't ignore the possibility they would exploit that fact.

To his surprise, Thundercracker grew angry. Ratchet had felt his dedication to Jazz and the other
refugees, but… this was a Seeker. He had done things that Ratchet was certain none of the human refugees knew about—unforgivable things to other species quite like the humans. Possibly to humans, themselves. Perhaps he had changed for good, but in Ratchet's experience, that hardly ever happened.

Thundercracker loomed from the table and seemed to choose his next words—all angry and loud—very carefully. He spoke to Ratchet as if speaking to a sparkling.

"Galvatron murdered my bondmate and my squad mates in front of me," the jet began with a cold snarl. His green optics were taken over by the vicious sneer on his faceplates. "If I run into Starscream now, or any other Decepticon force, I will rejoin them only if Galvatron exists in this world, because then I will find him and I will kill him."

The vehemence in his tone was startling, but Ratchet held his ground. "But no other reason?" he challenged, looking for some sort of sign of weakness of desire to defect.

"I have my family," Thundercracker snapped. He slid off the table and ignored Sideswipe as if he were part of the wall. "They are my only faction." With constrained anger and the utilization of his impressive height, he glared down at Ratchet. "You have your answers. Take me back. Now."

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Optimus had just seen Bumblebee off at the main gate (the poor scout had practically begged to receive the leave he had been promised earlier that week) when Ratchet pinged him to meet at the conference room. He hoped the news from Thundercracker's cortex scan would be good—though what "good" was in comparison to anything else was beyond him.

"We have a problem, Prime," were the first words out of Ratchet's vocalizer, which automatically made Optimus' shoulders sag.

"What did you find?" he asked. He considered getting Ironhide in with them, but he was watching the refugees. Keller had left, and Lennox and Epps were sleeping, finally; Optimus knew the men needed their rest so it was just him and Ratchet for now.

The medic looked frazzled. "Everything," he said. "Everything that Jazz told us. It's true."

Optimus did his best to keep calm. "They're really from 2054?" he asked, though he had already pretty much accepted that. It was too absurd to be a plot or a lie.

"Yes." Ratchet's scowl increased. "Worse yet, they were telling the truth about this Galvatron."

"Should we even bother to worry about it?" Optimus interjected, processors racing. "If it is truly a different time line now, is there a reason to worry about him?"

The idea of Megatron returning from the grave with such a powerful alias and ally… it was their worst-case scenario by far. There was no telling if their destiny would end up the same as Jazz's horror-filled world had, however.

"Perhaps not," Ratchet conceded. He sighed and crossed his arms. "But there are several things I am concerned with that still match up."

Optimus frowned. "Such as?"

"Megatron. He is in the same place as he was in their world," Ratchet replied.
"But the Abyss is the safest place the humans could find to deposit the remains."

"Not according to their future," the medic countered, shaking his helm again. "This Fallen mech found him and resurrected him somehow."

Optimus resisted cursing. "We cannot just move Megatron's shell. We don't have the resources," he said, remembering how the humans had been almost hysterical over their request to move it elsewhere when they had first buried the remains over a year ago. "Besides—how could they bring a spark back? Did they use the shard?"

They had one remaining piece of the All Spark left and that was deep within the base's vault. In a few months, it was supposed to be moved to Diego Garcia's compound for further analysis and higher security. Optimus had felt ill leaving the shard in human hands, but they had had to make concessions in order for the United States to continue to allow their influence in NEST relations. The threat of Starscream returning for the shard for any reason was always on their minds.

"Thundercracker knew nothing of an All Spark fragment. Perhaps there is none from their world," Ratchet said, thankfully dismissing that idea. "And who is to say Megatron's spark was the spark inside of his shell?" He looked pointedly out at the door, scowling. He seemed agitated, most likely from what he had seen. "The process isn't important, the fact that it happened is. I believe it would be in our best interests to remove and completely destroy Megatron's shell."

Optimus reached out with his hand and leaned against the wall, feeling overwhelmed by the politics involved in this alone. "The humans will not approve of this," he said, severe. He could just hear Keller panicking now. "Perhaps we should just increase the security around the Abyss? Now that we know it's a potential target, we can give it far more attention."

Ratchet watched him and didn't say anything. He didn't have to; the disapproval was embedded in his faceplates. Optimus realized Ratchet had a valid point, even if the humans might not see it as clearly as they did. The notion of time travel was perhaps more alien and farfetched to human minds than even the Transformers were, but for the Autobots… it was not improbable.

The future that Jazz warned them of was credible.

"...I do not like any of this. But you are right, my friend. We cannot stand by on this," Optimus finally said. He felt far older than he was, and compared to other life on Earth, that was very old. They did not have any other option, however. "Starscream has yet to make his move and when he does, we must be ready."

"Prime, the future I saw in Thundercracker's mind..." his CMO began, sighing. "We cannot let it happen. The Earth would be destroyed." He looked back at the hanger door again. "Everything I saw was devastation, ruin. I cannot even fathom the horrors they have lived through, especially the humans. Their race was practically extinct. We cannot allow that."

That was the worst-case scenario that flooded Optimus' thoughts during bouts of traitorous pessimism—not the end of their race, not the loss of the war. No, it was the loss of the humans, who were by all rights innocent victims caught up in a war that was not their own.

He would not let the legacy of his race be the Decepticon image of depravity and destruction. He could not let that happen.

"What now, Optimus?" Ratchet asked, breaking into his reverie.

"I'm not sure," he replied, honestly. "The President did not take Director Keller's news well." In fact,
the Director's verbal response to Optimus about the matter had proven the discussion had not gone well, at all. "I doubt the rest of NATO will take it better. However," he let out a heavy sigh, "as of now, the ten are considered political refugees, the first of the Transformer war on Earth." Standing upright, he turned to Ratchet with another pressing question on his processors. "What I must ask is, can we truly trust the ex-Decepticons to be neutral?"

He wanted to believe that they could be trusted; even though Thundercracker and Vortex had both displayed violent behavior in reaction to specific triggers, none of the ex-Decepticons appeared interested in seeking Starscream out. In fact, all of them, in discourse about their previous lives, had angrily denounced Galvatron and the Decepticon name. Perhaps they had suffered enough under their own faction's actions that they no longer felt like they belonged with them.

"Believe me. I saw Thundercracker's intentions," Ratchet said with a shake of the helm. "He is no more a Decepticon now than I am. He at least is evidence of how badly a tragedy can alter a spark for the better."

Optimus frowned. "This is a second chance for them all. We can't forget that," he warned, both Ratchet and himself.

Ratchet's optics dimmed. "No. Neither will they," he replied quietly.

Optimus knew that ten examples of the war gone wrong waited for them just a few hundred feet away. Optimus couldn't bear to look at them now—seeing them there, visible examples of a grim and terrible future, made it seem even more possible that their time line would become his own.

He could not allow that.

"We should sit Jazz down again, with Thundercracker and Arcee, tomorrow after they've rested," he said, bracing himself as he turned to leave. "We must come up with a coherent plan for how to deal with them. We must ask them what they need, what those children need. And we need a better timeline, with details about the early days of their struggle. It is only with data that Prowl will be able to develop tactics."

He would not allow it for as long as he still lived.

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Tranquility, Nevada

Summer was over—another injustice that Sam Witwicky was forced to endure. Time itself had betrayed him, and probably every other high school graduate, by seemingly skipping over the majority of their last true teenage summer and heading directly into the pit of academic despair, formally known as college.

Sam had to admit he had it better off than most kids his age. He might have four-plus years of sleepless nights and blue book nightmares ahead of him, but right now, he wasn't working two jobs or struggling to get accepted into a university. He was already accepted into Stanford and he had laughed at the idea of getting a summer job when Miles mentioned his own at the local pet store.

Sam Witwicky didn't work summers. He went and visited his best friend during those school-free and parent-free days. The fact that his best friend was a giant, sentient alien robot was just another fact of life that separated him from the majority of his peers.

Standing awkwardly at the end of his street, Sam did his best to appear normal and average, however. He had been waiting anxiously all day for Bumblebee to text him and had even given up
the chance to meet Mikaela later for dinner. She was working at the moment, alongside her newly released father, but she had sent her hellos for their mutual guardian and yellow friend. Sam hadn't seen the Autobot scout in almost two weeks, which he thought wasn't fair. It wasn't like Starscream was around at the moment; he didn't know why NEST kept the 'Bots held up in the base all the time when there wasn't a real war going on. Especially not during his last month of summer freedom.

What bothered him more than not being able to see Bumblebee as often as he wished, even during the aftermath of Mission City, was the fact that his metal friend seemed more distant than ever. They texted and chatted online as much as they could to make up for the loss of physical contact, but even that had diminished over the last few days. Sam didn't want to be paranoid about what was happening with NEST (he left that to his mother to speculate over), but something in his gut screamed *It's Serious.*

That's why he was more than willing to drop everything and wait for Bumblebee to return to Tranquility. Sam didn't want to just demand answers, but he was curious over the sudden strictness the Autobots had over Bumblebee leaving the base (because, honestly, Bumblebee was still Sam's guardian. Being separated defeated the purpose!). More than that, he just missed his friend.

"Where the heck were you?" Sam blurted the moment the shiny yellow and black Camaro rolled up next to him, the driver's side door popping open on the other side. "I've been waiting on the corner for like twenty minutes. Mrs. Newitt is going to think I got a new job," the human complained as he walked around to get inside.

"*Roxanne, you don't have to put on the red light,*" Bumblebee crooned from his radio. If the car could be gleeful, he would have been. "*Roxanne, you don't have to put on the red light*—!"

"Oh, ha ha, you're hilarious," Sam snapped, though he started to laugh. He sat down on the sleek black leather seat and shut the door. Bumblebee rolled away from the curb, no one actually having seen them anyway.

The dashboard was bright and the Autobot sigil on the steering wheel gleamed. "Hello, Sam," Bumblebee said, his cheerful voice coming from the speakers. It sounded better than last time.

"Hey, Bee," Sam replied with a grin. "Have fun with the folks?"

Two years ago Sam would have denied any possibility that he'd one day allow his own car to drive him around Tranquility while they exchanged conversation animatedly, gossiping about secret military functions, the latest trials he had had with a super-hot girlfriend and, of course, the well being of various aliens. Bumblebee seemed quieter than normal, so Sam picked up the weight of the discussion happily. He had also never expected to miss someone that wasn't even his own species, but Bumblebee, as well as the other Autobots, had become irreplaceable in his life.

It was a shame he couldn't share it actively with them, he thought with some despair. He had a higher-level security clearance than most Americans even knew existed, but he was still a civilian. He couldn't just pop on over to the NEST compound, and communication between him and the Autobots had to be done through Bumblebee, who was always getting flak from human military officials and politicians for talking to a civilian in the first place.

Then again, Sam Witwicky had also saved the world, so *some* concessions were made. Not enough for Sam's tastes, however.

"You know, I talked with Lennox few weeks ago," he was saying as they rolled past the gates of the old service road. Bumblebee had let him take control of the conversation and it ultimately ended up going to a topic he had been thinking about a lot recently. He felt nervous, but he remembered that
he was talking with Bumblebee. If he could tell this to anyone, it was the yellow Transformer.

Bumblebee made no sound, but Sam continued on as they rolled up to the hilltop. It was a memorable spot for all of them, well, for him, 'Bee and Mikaela. Bumblebee had just given up teasing the humans over their first "date" there after almost a year of poking fun.

"I told him I wanted to help out with the 'Bots, so I was considering Geo-Politics as a major, since xenology isn't exactly a career field yet," Sam said, clasping his hands together. He slid out of the car without needing a prompt to give Bumblebee space to transform. "I'm listed as undecided now, I know, but if I do that, I could get a job working for NEST." Sam awkwardly laughed, rubbing the back of his head, trying to sense any kind of rejection from his friend. "I know I'm not a soldier, but I want to help. I wanted to talk to Optimus about what he thought. I figured he might be a good name to put on my résumé, you know—?"

During his semi-nervous rant, Bumblebee had transformed, standing up in his proper form, one with legs, arms and a head. It was silly to think Sam had once thought seeing the alien like that was frightening. It was still awe-inspiring, but nothing shocking. Then again, the thrill of having him walking around mostly came from the threat of someone spotting him. Earth was still ignorant of (most) of the secrets Sector-7 had been keeping, save the fact "a group of non-politically aligned terrorists" had attacked Mission City.

Calling the Decepticons "terrorists" wasn't untrue, but Sam and Mikaela both agreed it was a horrible cop-out. Lennox claimed it was only a matter of time before Keller was forced to order a release of the truth and the rumors online kind of already spoiled most of the facts anyway. Sam was still looking forward to the day the truth did come out; hiding a sentient car under normal situations wasn't easy.

However, standing there, Sam noticed something off about Bumblebee. The scout, generally giving Sam all of his attention, making him the focus of his bright blue eyes, wasn't looking at Sam. He was staring out at the horizon and seemed almost… withdrawn. Sam hesitated. "Hey. You alright?" he asked. He must have startled Bumblebee, who jumped and seemed to become flustered under the attention. Definitely something wrong. Sam walked up closer, trying to be reassuring. "Come on, talk to me, big guy. You look freaked out."

Bumblebee stared back and for a second, Sam thought he might tell him. "Sam..." the Autobot began, but he stopped himself. He looked away, awkward.

Sam frowned. "You can tell me anything," he said. He laughed wryly and gestured at his chest. "If you're worried about a security leak, I kinda figured that the US military allowing me to walk around out here without Simmons breathing down my neck is proof that I'm somewhat trustworthy."

He was joking, perhaps not about not being a risk, but Bumblebee didn't laugh. He just continued to stare stoically out at the distance. Sam shifted uneasily; something was wrong. He considered maybe he had done something, but the lack of contact in the last week worried him more.

"Is... Starscream back?" Sam asked, now increasingly more nervous. It could have been anything. More aliens. More government drama. Hell, maybe Bumblebee couldn't hang around anymore—

"No," Bumblebee broke in, shaking his head. He stared down at the human; for an expressive guy, he could also keep his emotions very guarded. The robot face sort of helped. "No, Sam. This is not about the Decepticons."

"Then what?" Sam asked, confused. Unless this was about NEST. Maybe they told Bee he couldn't
come around anymore. Sam… wasn't sure if he could deal with that.

Bumblebee fidgeted under Sam's attention and finally caved. He walked forward a little, letting Sam follow slowly. "We found several new mechs two days ago," he said. His voice was still garbled, but apparently this required more than a song to explain. "They were not Autobots, but they are not Decepticons."

"Whoa. What?" Sam asked, stunned. He almost stumbled over an exposed root, but did his best to keep up to Bumblebee's large steps. "I thought you guys only came in two flavors."

That did earn him a small chuckle. "Neutrals are not unheard of. At the beginning of the war, many of us were Neutrals, such as Ratchet and the twins," he explained.

Sam frowned. "Twins?" That wasn't exactly the sort of thing he equated with giant robots and none of the Autobots he was aware of at the base fit that description. Not that he was around often enough to really know them that well…

"Sideswipe and his brother. Sunstreaker is not on Earth at the moment. Regardless." Bumblebee sighed, his shoulders sagging. "The fact they are Neutrals doesn't worry us. The fact that they…" he trailed off, stopping both physically and verbally. He stared out at nothing again for a moment before adding, "They… are not… from here."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

Bumblebee shook his head, optics sad. "I cannot explain. It is highly classified. I don't want to get you in trouble, Sam." He hesitated. "But…"

Sam filled in the blanks. "You need to talk to somebody," he said, gently.

The Autobot abruptly crouched before Sam. "I am concerned," Bumblebee said, optics blaring into Sam's face. "I am very concerned, Sam."

"Why?" the human asked, feeling a bit overwhelmed. He didn't want to hear that; if the Autobots were concerned about something, it had to be big. Sam wasn't sure Earth could handle something big. They didn't even know about the Autobots yet.

Bumblebee's shoulders drew up and he looked tense. "…They warned us. They saw many evil things done where they come from, by Megatron and other Decepticons," he explained slowly. "They warned us that it is possible that those same evils will happen here on Earth."

That didn't make sense. "…But Megatron is dead," Sam said, the complaint weak.

"I know," Bumblebee replied. He looked at the ground pensively. "That is why it feels silly to worry."

Sam didn't know exactly how to comfort the mech. He wasn't good at doing that with humans. "Well, worrying is fine, Bee," he said, trying to sound convincing. He reached out and grasped Bumblebee's faceplates. Years ago, he never would have believed he could do that without an ounce of fear. "I worry a lot, too."

He worried about a lot of things. He worried about things his peers never dreamed about. Not because he wanted to, but because he was Sam Witwicky and that simply meant he wasn't going to have a normal life. Ever.

He wouldn't take it any other way, though.
"I know, Sam. I don't like it when you do," Bumblebee said, sounding sad. He reached out with his own hand and gently touched it to Sam's shoulder. "But I also know that you are brave and ready and capable to take on challenges you should not have to shoulder at your age." Optics brighter, the mech definitely smiled in his own way. "Thank you for listening to me."

"Don't mention it, Bee. I'm happy to," the human replied, patting the mech's face. He stepped back and tried to be more confident than he was feeling. "It's the least I can do with you driving out here when you should be with the others."

Bumblebee suddenly narrowed his optics; if he had a normal mouth, he probably would have been scowling. "I should be with you, Sam," he said, correcting him firmly. "You are still my charge. More than that, you are my friend."

Warm fuzzies all over. Sam grinned. "I wish I could help you guys," he said, shaking his head. "Or at least be at the base with you sometimes."

"You have done more than your fair share of service to your country and people, Sam," Bumblebee replied. He sounded more cheerful now. "But I understand."

Bumblebee stood back up and Sam smiled up at his friend, despite the uncomfortable feeling in his gut. He hated being useless. He hated being away from the Autobots and their fight, not because he wanted the danger, but because it felt right being there. He wanted to help. He just… didn't have many options at the moment.

After several minutes of watching the human with a careful expression, Bumblebee seemed to reach some sort of conclusion in an internal debate with himself. 

"Perhaps… I can ask if Optimus will see you this week. You have a few more weeks before school starts," the scout said. His eyes twinkled mischievously. "Things are crazy right now for us, but maybe you can visit when it calms down."

Sam almost screamed. "Really? !" he blurted, unable not to grin like an idiot.

Bumblebee paused, but then inclined his head. "Mikaela, too," he said. "I miss her."

That was totally doable. "She's going to freak out. This is great," Sam gushed. He had been dying to get a chance to speak with Optimus in private for the last six months, ever since he came up with his future plans. NEST made it impossible to speak with any of the other 'Bots alone most times. 

"Come on. Let's go tell her now," Bumblebee said, far happier than he had been when they first arrived at the hill. If they were lucky, they could catch her leaving work.

Bumblebee transformed and Sam jumped inside, mind racing with all the things he was planning. He missed being involved with the Autobots, though he could have lived without the fear attached to encountering Decepticons. It didn't seem fair, or logical, that when things were calm and Decepticon-free that he was banned from hanging out with the aliens. They weren't just his protectors; they were his friends.

Yeah, his summer had just gotten better, tenfold.

"Hey, Bee?" he asked as they headed back into town.

The dashboard seemed to brighten. "Yes, Sam?"

Sam smiled at it, as easily as he would any regular face. "Don't worry about the future," he said.
"We're going to be fine." It was easier to believe that himself when he told someone else.

Comforting an alien ten times his age seemed silly, but it was Bumblebee. Sam couldn't offer him anything except words and the occasional car wash, but the scout took it all with more grace than a human would have. Bumblebee was just good like that.

"Yes," the Autobot replied, smile in his voice. "We will be."

It was even easier to believe when Sam heard it from him.

Grinning, Sam continued to plan his future.

End Chapter 7.

Next we get to see Mama-Bear-Jazz, but before that, we'll be having a little bonus chapter before moving on with the story. :) We'll be doing that every once in a while to show what some of the characters are doing in the background. The bonus chapters are very short and will probably be updated about two days after the regular chapter updates.

A/Ns:
-Yes, Sam, Mikaela and their ensemble of human friends are involved in this. Sam has quite a bit of a role in this, too.
-Bumblebee talks normally in this story because, seriously, why the hell didn't they fix his voice in the movies? LOL. He does both radio and actual speaking just because it's saner that way (and easier to write).
Interlude 1: Convenience

Chapter Notes

Tons of thanks to my beta Shantastic for the inspiration here! :) She helped to write a lot of this and gave me the idea for having the Interludes at all. They will help give some insight into what certain characters are doing, since I have had to leave a lot out, such as the humans adapting to this new world. This is happening technically at the beginning of the last chapter. Enjoy!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Standardized white t-shirts, khaki pants that fit Barns but were far too large for the girls (even in the smallest of sizes), and sneakers that didn't quite fit either: they were NEST's idea of a peace offering. Or just a pathetically obvious comment on their own appearances. Barns called it hospitable. Kass called it friendly. Rachel called it bribery.

The sergeant that had brought over the clothing had been earnest in asking them what else they needed, trying to find some way to make them more comfortable. After all, it was clear that he would never want to live in the middle of a hangar with a bunch of dangerous Decepticons. In deference to his evident sincerity, all four humans had grudgingly accepted the new clothing, though Rachel and Kass both voiced their complaints about losing their weapons. They weren't getting those back, Thundercracker had said, just as bitter. Ratchet had disabled his thrusters, keeping him grounded, and all of the mechs had lost their weapons protocols, thanks to the Autobots' paranoia. Rachel had to give them bonus points for that though; that meant they were smarter than they looked.

With Jazz off with the Autobots having a freaking tea party, or whatever they were taking their freaking time with, Rachel was left sitting with her friends in what was gradually becoming "home base" for them, at least psychologically. Thundercracker and Vortex had shifted the red shipping crates around, ignoring Ironhide and Jolt's suspicious looks, to form an alcove that gave them some sense of security.

Rachel was concerned. She was also bored out of her mind, but that only fed her concern as she looked around at her friends and wondered. Most of the mechs, now that they had had the chance to refuel ("Wow, this isn't that much better than the slag we've been drinking." "Well, they haven't made a converter yet, apparently, Vortex."), were distracted by the Internet. Barns was immensely jealous and kept asking questions about what the famous antique technology could do. Rachel couldn't care less about old shit like that, even if it was keeping mechs like Wildrider occupied while they waited.

Kass was content to read through some newspapers that Major Asshole had given them before he went off to some meeting ("Lennox is a good guy, Rach, so be nice."). Rachel had skimmed a few pages of one, but the dates were still unnerving to look at. So, for the most part alone, she had to sit and think of ways to keep her own mind occupied—and to keep from going off the deep end.
A stealthy glance to one side revealed that Danny was nestled quite firmly within Wildrider's hands, wrapped in blankets they had been given by NEST. The mech holding her was very still, despite being so distracted by his discoveries. The brown skinned woman was either asleep or just ignoring everyone, but Rachel couldn't blame her for being so quiet. Even if... even if Wheeljack was still with them, the sudden world change would have been shocking enough to render the talkative girl mute for a while.

Then again... it wasn't just Danny who was feeling off about the whole thing. Rachel peered upwards at the high, high ceiling. She could barely see the fluorescent lights, as Barns called them, but they were hanging there like stars.

Lights. Electricity. The Internet. What the hell was this place? Rachel wished the lights were closer, so she could really look at them, suddenly curious. What did electricity look like up close? She had only seen pictures and heard Jazz's descriptions, well, at least before the lights in the lab. And those had been made by the scientists, so they may not have been human technology. Did the covers burn like fire?

In front of her, Wildrider paused, intrigued by something he had found online.

"What is four-chan?" he asked.

Barns shrugged. "I don't know, but it sounds like fun." Rachel sighed gustily, disinterested.

What the hell were they going to do now? She tried to think of their options, but nothing came to mind, at least, nothing that didn't involve fighting their way out. She was sick of having literal armed guards hovering near the exits, as if anticipating a breakout at any second, as if the ten of them were criminals or (worse yet) animals. Rachel knew the Autobots had always been on humanity's side, but that didn't mean they were on her family's side. That was the deciding factor for her on whether or not to hate them.

But they couldn't run. Not yet. Not until all of them were together and Jazz came up with a brilliant plan. Rachel bitterly knew that wasn't going to happen, however; he was more interested in making peace than making an escape. She hoped he was correct. Deep inside, she knew that they'd have little success hiding from the Autobots in this odd version of Earth that they'd fallen into. But that didn't make her feel better about the situation.

"This waiting is driving me crazy!" she grumbled loudly, knowing it would be heard.

Thundercracker just looked at her and said, "Be patient. Jazz will be back soon."

Rachel gritted her teeth, even more irritated.

"If you're so bored, why don't you go explore a little?" Arcee suddenly suggested, surprising Rachel.

"Where?" Barns asked, baffled. He looked around them. "We cannot leave the building, so—?"

"Why don't you check out the bathrooms?" Jolt called out from a few hundred yards to their left, causing everyone—even Wildrider—to jump and stare at him with wary eyes and optics. He shifted uneasily under their gazes and then shrugged. "Just a suggestion."

Bathrooms? Rachel looked over at where he had pointed. The long side of the hangar held a series of doorways. Human-sized and human-shaped, most of them were adjacent to a window, but they clearly weren't exterior doors. The first open doorway led into another room—an empty room without a window.
"Just don't leave the hangar," Jolt added, bemused. Ironhide was ignoring the situation entirely. Rachel was glad, because he made her immensely uneasy.

Danny didn't even look up at the discussion, so that left the three other humans to decide. Rachel looked to Kass and Barns, who looked back at her with hesitant expressions. Should we? It might be risky, but if she stayed in that spot any longer, Rachel was certain she would have made a break for it anyway. And the Autobot had given them permission.

Thundercracker rumbled darkly as Rachel stood up, but made no effort to stop her. Arcee had also gotten standing and rolled closer, obviously intending to follow. Well, as long as they had backup…

Moving as if walking around on glass, the three plus the femme made their way to the other wall, gazes going everywhere. Rachel was impressed by how clean everything was; everything was so new.

The doors and windows were all alluring in their own right and a newfound curiosity prompted her to inspect them. Most rooms were dark and seemed off limits, though she was very interested in snooping around the room with the sign that clearly read, *Keep this area Clean! Your mother doesn't work here, so clean up after YOURSELF!* Apparently there was a food cache in the black box in the back of that room plus a box that cooked food instantly, according to Arcee's database, so that was important to make a note of.

What intrigued them all the most was the doorway without a solid door. It was a foreboding looking corridor, to say the least.

"What's this place?" Rachel asked, surprised. She really didn't want to go into a dark creepy place by herself, but maybe it had something interesting to give them. She had decided that they had to know their surroundings and this place was far more alien than any of the abandoned cities they'd explored had ever been.

Barns hummed thoughtfully as he looked down the dark pathway and then leaned back to look down the other row of doors. "Well, all of those are offices… oh, they have computers!" he exclaimed suddenly.

Rachel moved up to see where he was looking at, in the other office. It had a row of what had to be the smallest datapads she had ever seen—

Except they weren't. She was awed by the sight of the human technology—computers, she belatedly recognized—because the ones they had found in old homes and libraries and office buildings had all been broken or covered in grime. There had certainly never been power to run them. These looked brand new and practically untouched, plugged into their power strips, and waiting to be used.

"I wonder…" Barns began, before cutting himself off sharply. "I should not try it now. They might get mad," he said, smiling sheepishly.

That was unfortunately true; NEST had thrown a fit when Ironhide discovered that the mechs were accessing the Internet, though the usage was being monitored now apparently. Until the human refugees got clearance to use the tech, they probably weren't allowed to touch the computers. Rachel wanted to try them out as well. She could probably write a lot faster with them, though she dreaded learning how to use them. The keys looked complicated.

"You can have Jazz ask if you can play with one later, I'm sure," Kass said, chuckling. It felt odd to hear a laugh from any of their group members. Rachel smiled to herself at the sound.
"True," Barns replied, nodding. He stepped a bit back into the darkened hallway. "Alright, if this is a bathroom, then where…?"

He moved against the wall, trying to find anything at all that might help them to navigate the dark hall. Rachel didn't know how far it went, so they had to be careful—

And then there was light. She gasped a little when two overhead lights turned on above them, illuminating a drastically smaller hall than she had expected to see. The cement floor ran all the way to a large door at the end of the short corridor, where tile covered the floor instead. Rachel spun around and saw Kass standing by the edge of the hallway, her hand plastered to the wall. Beneath her hand was a white box—no, it was too flat. It was more like a white plate on the wall, and Kass was touching the black nob that stuck out from it. Rachel realized that controlled the lights.

"…This is so… cool," Kass said, eyes shining as she flicked the light switch up and down, throwing light and darkness upon them repeatedly with the ease of a deity. "Wow."

After the three of them took turns happily playing with the lights (Arcee watching with a quiet, amused expression), Rachel moved past Barns into the apparent bathroom. There wasn't a door here either, but this time she knew to feel for a switch on the wall. The new room lit up immediately, all bright, shiny and startlingly gray.

For a bathroom, it was huge and rather oddly shaped. The white bowls arranged in a row on the wall were called sinks—Rachel remembered learning that from Barns and Kass when they had entered buildings before. The blue painted stalls on the other side of the room were all uniform, but she couldn't figure out why they were necessary.

Barns stood behind Rachel, observing the room with a concentrated expression. "I am confused. Ce n'est pas la toilette. There are sinks and…" he said, trailing off. He walked over to the row of stalls and disappeared into one of them. He then laughed and the sound was followed by a shocking roaring sound that made the others jump. "Ah, never mind. Une toilette!"

"I haven't been in one of these since that time we raided that library in Lyon," Rachel commented, glancing around. Back then, of course, there were no lights and they hadn't gone in there to use anything. Nothing worked, after all. They had just been looking for supplies. Even still, this place was quite different.

With Arcee barely able to squeeze through the door, the four companions gazed around the room with interest. Kass went over to the row of sinks and twisted one of the knobs experimentally, gasping loudly at the effect. Rachel felt her brain stumble as she saw fresh, clear water streaming from the faucet. Kass and Barns looked at her and then back at the bowl, at the water that seemed to be flowing out of thin air.

Running water?

Wow.

"Wait," Arcee said, surprising them. Her metallic voice echoed oddly in the room, as did her wheel's gyros as she rolled across the shiny floor. "What is this here?"

The next room, which was equally large, was very empty and had silver knobs all along the walls. She turned one with her massive pink hand, and then shot backwards in shock as water sprayed out of the wall, right at her. Rachel jumped at the same time as the water flew out at them, barely stopping before their feet. The curtain swayed around the small area where the water actually reached and suddenly, the arrangement made sense. This was the bathroom.
Hesitantly, Rachel stepped closer, heart pounding. She raised a hand and let it dip into the stream of water. It fell like rain, but—it wasn't like rain. It was warm water.

Glorious, hot water.

Something spontaneously clicked in the back of her mind.

"I take it back," she said, blinking through the spray. Against her better judgment, Rachel had to grin over at her human friends, who wore identical gleeful expressions. "I think I believe in Heaven."

Perhaps... this wouldn't be as awful she had first thought.

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**End Interlude One: Convenience**.

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**A/Ns:**
-"4chan" - if you don't already know what this is, don't look for it. I'm not even joking. **Don't.** It's the 6th layer of Internet Hell, the 7th being within it (whose name I dare not mention).
-Yes, they have seen bathrooms before, only defunct ones in ruined public buildings.
"You're telling me they're from the future."

The dark haired NEST solider in front of him hesitated, but nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Like, full out, *Back to the Future* shenanigans."

"They used a space bridge—apparently the Cybertronians have time machines," the private said, stumbling over the key words of *Cybertronians* and *space bridge*, whatever the hell that was. "Or teleporters. We're not exactly sure of the science."

"But these refugees… are from the future?"

"Yes. They come from a post-apocalyptic world, sir. Everything's dead, from automated Decepticon drones, or from the subsequent fallout." The grunt paused and seemed to stumble mentally over the information he had. "Or, well, from this other bad guy. The details aren't clear yet. We're not exactly sure why there's a difference now, but most importantly, we all lost."

"That's… great." Seymour Simmons looked at the sheet of information in front of him and when he looked back up at the younger man, he squinted his eyes. "And we are doing… what about this?"

The soldier had the sense to look timid. "Nothing yet, sir," he stuttered. "Major Lennox is currently debriefing with DNI Keller, Optimus Prime and his officers, plus Jazz and his fellow leaders."

Simmons, well-briefed in all things NBE, started. "I thought he was dead!" he exclaimed. The Jazz one, or whatever his alias was, was definitely dead.

"Not quite." The solider held up another sheet of paper and Simmons snatched it immediately. "He's, uh, from the other world. Apparently, it was a whole different time line."

It took a few moments for all of that to catch up to his brain. "That's good. Right? Not the same time line, so not the same future?" Simmons asked, mostly to himself. He turned and looked down the hallway, which was more of a cavern considering the giants that always walked up and down them.

"Maybe… sir?"

Teeth grinding, Simmons turned and glared at the NEST soldier. "My next question may be above your pay grade, but I have to ask," he began, pointing his hand specifically to his left. "If they're in debriefing now, with all major representatives… why am I out here?"
The giant door adjacent to them was closed, presumably with all of those aforementioned officials behind it. And Simmons, newly arrived from Washington, was outside those doors.

He couldn't help but feel something was wrong about that situation.

"Uh, the Major insisted they get started right away, sir," the soldier stammered. He stood back as Simmons loomed ever-so-slightly closer.

"Without me," he stated. Yes. Something was wrong with that.

"Not specifically you, sir…"

Leaning back, Simmons grappled with his annoyance. "Politics," he whispered, glaring at the door and disdaining his position outside of it. "I hate politics."

He ignored the aide's startled yelp as he pushed past him and shoved the sliding door back. It rolled away to reveal six robots and three humans, who were standing up on the catwalk to give them better visibility to the giant robots they were conversing with. At his dramatic entrance, every eye and optic moved in his direction. Simmons grinned and marched on inside.

"Simmons," Lennox said, surprised. At least he had the decency to look like he hadn't planned to exclude the other agent. Epps beside him simply rolled his eyes.

Simmons smiled tightly and waved his hand at the Major as he walked toward the center of the room. He ignored how Iron-Sides scowled his way. "Don't mind me, just popping by," he announced cheerfully. He spun around and saw the three robots not attached to NEST rosters. He grinned openly at them. "So… you're the mechs from the future?"

Two of the robots were unfamiliar and rather strange looking, even for the NBE standards. The pink one was insanely small compared to the other mechs, and if Simmons' eyes weren't deceiving him, he almost wanted to say it was a chick. Chick robots? He shook the image away from his mind, focusing on the largest mech in the room, well, other than Optimus. This new guy had wings—since when did Autobots have wings?

It was the third, middle-sized mech that really caught his eye, however. The silver small one—yeah, that had to be the Jazz duplicate—smirked. "Yup," Jazz replied, nodding. "You still Simmons?"

So there was one of him in the other world, too. Interesting. "Yes, yes I am," he said proudly.

"Is Sector Seven still here then?" Jazz continued, glancing around the room. "Ours got deactivated."

Too interesting. "Yes, well, NEST command found some use for my skills, it would seem," Simmons replied sharply. He waved his hands again at them all. "Carry on, gentlemen and gentlebots."

"We were discussing possible options concerning how to deal with the refugees," Keller said from up on the catwalk. He nodded at Lennox and Epps. "NEST has offered to house them until further notice."

"House is a strong word," the giant winged robot interrupted, sounding peeved. He had a very deep voice.

Simmons peered up at the mech, using his hand to block out a non-existent glare. "Whoa. Aren't you a big guy?" he asked. It was only mildly impressive, really.
The winged Transformer peered down at Simmons with a level stare. "And you are very small," he said bluntly. Emphasis on small.

Jazz burst out laughing and even the pink chick-bot smirked. Simmons did his best not to scowl; he didn't like the cheeky ones.

"I didn't think you guys came with wings," he demanded, looking around, catching Optimus Prime's gaze specifically. "What's with that?"

The winged mech replied anyway. "I am a Seeker," he said bluntly. The way Iron-Sides bristled was very obvious, even from all the way down on the floor.

"A what—?" Simmons blurted. He hated it when they started throwing terms around that he didn't know. They were supposed to have compiled a list of translations ages ago, but since when did anyone on this godforsaken team ever listen to him?

"An ex-Decepticon flier," Optimus said, catching his attention. He ignored Simmons' gaping expression after that admission. "There are three ex-Cons total in their group. They are Neutrals officially."

The so-called Seeker frowned. "We all are," he pointed out.

The pink chick-bot opened her mouth to speak, but stopped herself. She looked away pointedly. All of that social interaction was quite fascinating, but Simmons had larger concerns at the moment.

"You're telling me we're giving amnesty to Decepticons now?" Simmons demanded, rounding on Optimus Prime as much as a six-foot tall man possibly could. "Since when?"

"Since ten of them were spontaneously dumped on our base against their will," Lennox answered instead, looking strangely annoyed. Then again, the soldier didn't really appreciate Simmons, even on his best days.

"We are not all Decepticons," the pink one snapped. She had a very, very faint accent, possibly Mandarin. She drew herself up, towering over the humans despite her comparatively small size. "I am an Autobot. I always will be."

"Don't start, Arcee," Jazz pleaded. "Let's just make sure the kids'll be okay."

Arcee glared at him and turned that same expression to the NEST officials, including Prime. "Then decide what to do with us," she said, firm. "I would have no objections to rejoining the Autobot forces."

"And most of us will not be joining," the flier-Seeker-giant thing countered, stepping up closer. He looked at Prime specifically. "I am a Neutral. I always will be."

Beside him, Jazz nodded resolutely. "Ditto."

Ratchet, one of the few robots Simmons didn't always receive glares from, made a sound more akin to a backfiring car than an alien robot. "Jazz?" he repeated, stunned.

"I have more than just my own aft t' worry about now," the silver mech replied. He looked a little uneasy under all the attention, but he crossed his arms against his chest in a human-like gesture. "If I join anybody, 'Rider and Vortex might feel threatened. If they're Neutrals, I will be, too."

If Simmons had any chance to speak, he would have challenged that statement. As far as the
government should be concerned, there were 'Cons and there were Autobots, because anything else was getting too damn confusing. Earth wasn't some catch-all for wayward space orphans.

However, before he could say just that, Optimus nodded. "That is acceptable," he replied, expression guarded. He looked back at Keller, who also didn't look happy, but he didn't say anything else. "For now, though, we must iron out the details of your amnesty. The United States military and government have several concerns we must address first…"

With his boss mute, Simmons seethed in silence. He didn't trust that word—Neutral—any more than he trusted NEST officers to actually comprehend the dangers of having the aliens there to begin with. Sure, the Autobots came in handy, but why that suddenly made them "buddies" instead of "alien refugees and possible enemies" was beyond him.

He didn't want to listen to the politics of this mess; he wanted to get to the decisive action. Simmons left the room, knowing his presence wouldn't be missed anyway.

He still had a job to do, even if no one valued him for it.

"You, with me," he snapped as he walked briskly down the hallway. The soldier who had escorted him to the command room jumped up and followed him.

"Sir?"

Simmons glanced down at the intel sheets again, browsing the names on it quickly. "They came with more people, correct? Where?"

"At Hangar B, sir," the soldier replied.

Sighing gustily, Simmons marched across the concrete base with a headache looming somewhere behind his skull. "Jesus… if Banachek could see us now." The lucky ex-Sector-7 agent had retired smartly after the events of 2007. "I want the details on all of these people. I don't care if they're human, mech, or fairy, we're dealing with something a lot bigger than the average alien problem."

The soldier hesitated as they stopped at one of the desks. "Like, sir?" he asked.

Simmons paused in his shuffling of files and fixed the man with an intense stare. "Space-time quantum mechanics," he replied. He snapped the manila folder in his hands shut. "Also, six new aliens walking around. No matter where they came from, an increase of any size was not on the agenda yet."

The Autobots had requested permission to allow more of their own soldiers down to Earth and only recently did POTUS issue the order to allow more friendly aliens to join NEST. The new group was arriving within the month, so this unexpected imbalance of aliens running loose, even within NEST, was unacceptable.

"I don't believe the refugees are available for interrogation, sir," the soldier replied, looking flustered as he took up walking behind Simmons as they headed toward Hangar B. "Jazz was against bringing the humans into this yet. They're apparently severely shell-shocked by something that happened back in their timeline, sir."

"I don't care," Simmons shot back. "It's not like I can do anything worse to them. They survived an apocalypse right—?"

All at once, Simmons felt part of his mind go 'Oh' while the rest of him stopped physically in his tracks. The soldier stopped behind him and peered at him curiously.
"They come from a post-apocalyptic world, sir. Everything's dead, from automated Decepticon drones or from the subsequent fallout."

Simmons gaped at the scene outside the hangar's side door, almost fifty yards in front of them still, his mind reeling.

Fallout.

"What the—where are you going? !" the NEST soldier next to him blurted when Simmons suddenly tore away from the railing and took off toward the door.

"I need a team with me, now!" Simmons shouted back, running as fast as he could. "And for the love of God, bring some damn HAZMAT suits!"

The soldier looked bewildered, but soon rushed off to do as he was told. Simmons ran on, praying that he wasn't too late.

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The past wasn't too bad of a place, honestly. Bluestreak wasn't used to the Autobots being there or the humans, but everything else was almost… the same.

Almost.

The military group they were with, NEST, was nice enough to let them take up nearly an entire hangar of the airfield base they were on and that was a good thing. It was big, filled with nice big container units that gave them cover, and most of the soldiers left them alone. Bluestreak had been afraid they would be separated, but Jazz and Thundercracker's insistence had paid off. Now it was the remaining seven sitting around in the hangar while Arcee, Thundercracker and Jazz spoke with Optimus.

The first sight of Optimus Prime had made Bluestreak's spark sing. He had never met the mech in person, even in his own timeline. To see him standing there in front of them, alive in the midst of this new timeline, was comforting. It made Bluestreak happy to see that the Autobots here had survived. Maybe things were different, but that was a good thing.

What didn't make Bluestreak feel comfortable was the fact that when Optimus and the other Autobots looked at him, or at one of his friends, they didn't look nearly as happy to see him as he was to see them.

He had a feeling Prowl had wanted to speak with him; he never looked at Bluestreak like the others sometimes did. Bluestreak missed Prowl, though not in the same way Jazz had. Prowl had been one of the few Praxians left alive by the time the Allspark was launched into space. They were practically kin, which made it difficult not to reach out to the other mech when they were near each other. Maybe when things were calmer, he would have time to talk with Prowl.

Beside him, Kass was braiding Danny's hair, combing through it with some of the hair care tools the NEST soldiers had given them, along with other sundries and food. The girls had showered, but they refused to wear the ill-fitting clothing that NEST had brought to them. Danny just sat there, letting Kass do whatever she wanted; she looked, as Barns put it, shell-shocked. Bluestreak wanted to whine and cradle all four of his human friends close, because they all looked as miserable as the mechs felt when they… remembered.

Wheeljack was gone. Dead. Bluestreak's processors were still having difficulty writing that as fact into his long term code. He continually expected to turn around and see Wheeljack's lights flashing in
a cheerful pattern, hear his voice, especially now as they dealt with this strange new world. But he was never coming back, so that left ten of them now. Only ten.

Looking to the side, Bluestreak saw Wildrider staring intently out the hangar bay door, where they could see glimpses of the green forest at the edge of the base. The desire for freedom was something they all shared, but they had to stay put, otherwise there would be trouble. Even Wildrider recognized and obeyed this silent decree. Bluestreak felt obligated to stay with Vortex and Wildrider, keep them company so they were more comfortable; he knew they were more on edge around the new Autobots than he or any of the others were.

"Who's that?" Rachel suddenly asked, startling Bluestreak as well as the others.

She was perched on Vortex’s legs, pointing out the other, smaller hangar door toward the back of the room. Several men were approaching them at a rapid pace; the one leading the group looked sweaty, like he had been running. Bluestreak frowned at the group marching ominously towards them, but recognized some of the NEST soldiers.

Behind him, Wildrider made a soft growling sound as he uncoiled from his seated position, but Kass gently hushed him as she and the other humans stood up properly to meet the new humans face to face. They had had little contact with the NEST soldiers without the presence of the Autobots or Jazz and Thundercracker. Bluestreak couldn’t help but feel a little nervous as the new man approached.

The guns weren't helping anyone's nerves, either.

"Hello, hello, you must be our distinguished new guests," the man in the front announced as he drew closer. He wasn't a soldier from the looks of it; he was wearing what Barns had told Bluestreak was called a suit.

"Oh, Primus," Vortex growled. Bluestreak withheld a nervous giggle; he thought the guy was silly looking, but laughing at people was rude regardless of where they were.

Ignoring the comment, the suited-man held up a boxy looking device, grinning at the humans specifically. "My name is Agent Simmons," he said. Bluestreak didn't like his smile. "I'm NEST's chief liaison between different government offices and the aliens."

"I thought Director Keller was," Barns said, frowning deeply. Not that they knew much about what that meant, but Bluestreak was certain Barns was correct.

"No." Simmons paused and almost scowled. "I work under him, but they should go to me first."

Kass crossed her arms against her chest, standing in front of Danny more. "They didn't this time," she replied calmly.

"Don't remind me," Simmons growled. He suddenly flipped his emotions and gave her a bright grin. "All right, you, girl with the accent. Step forward, if you will?"

Instantly, the air seemed to change. "What?" Barns demanded, as Kass reluctantly took a single step forward, leery of getting too close to this Simmons, whoever he was. The Frenchman moved forward too, eyes narrowed. "What is that?" he asked, looking pointedly at the boxy device.

Simmons ignored him as he held the device up in the air and pointed it toward Kass. It didn't look dangerous, but all of their group watched tensely. "Hold still for one second. Thank y—" A shrill noise filled the air and Simmons made a choking sound. "Oh, fuck me."

That immediately made Kass flinch backwards. "What?" she asked, startled. "What's the matt—?"
"No time!" Simmons shouted, eyes huge. He spun around and pointed at several of the armed soldiers. When he spoke, he almost sounded scared. "You! Get decontamination up, NOW!"

And then, Simmons reached out and grabbed Kass by the arm roughly, jerking her toward the door. Bluestreak immediately opened his mouth to yell at him to stop, alarmed by his aggression, but someone beat him to it. Literally.

"LIBÉREZ-LA!" Barns shouted, his voice and face contorted with an anger Bluestreak had never, ever seen on the generally calm man.

Simmons had just enough time to look up when Barns came flying at him and punched him square in the face. The dark-clothed man dropped with a startled yell and Barns lunged, screaming angrily in French. Rachel also joined in the yelling, yanking Kass back, who looked frightened. Suddenly, everything seemed out of control and more armed men came running from across the room. Bluestreak didn't know quite what Simmons had been talking about—but damned if he was going to let these humans hurt his friends.

"BACK OFF!" someone else shouted over the din of the humans fighting. Vortex came in between the army and the rest of them, crouching defensively.

Bluestreak's battle programming activated as soon as he saw the men raise their weapons. Humans or not—an enemy of any one of them was an enemy of them all. That's how they worked. They were a team—this was survival. They might not have had their external weapons, but they were still able to defend themselves.

"—JE VOUS DÉTESTE, VOUS BÂTARDS—!" Barns kept shouting, swinging after Simmons, who had managed to stand. Barns lunged again and Rachel backed him up as they tried to chase the man away with their kicks and hits.

"Calm down, right now, all of—!" one of the soldiers yelled, rushing toward them.

A loud engine roar stopped him from getting close however; Bluestreak jumped back when Wildrider, snarling, rushed forward and almost seemed ready to jump at the human. However, the mech dropped down low over Kass and Danny, optics blazing almost white.

"Come closer, come closer, I vill CRUSH you!" Wildrider screeched threateningly. Vortex quickly stepped in front of him, the entire group moving backwards, Rachel and Barns retreating at the same time, taking cover. Everyone watched the NEST soldiers with as much wary malice as they would a pack of drones or cannibals.

Bluestreak whipped around and stooped defensively as more soldiers attempted to come up from behind. "Do not approach," he warned, louder than he normally would have spoken. He tried to crouch as low as possible, to give the humans in the center of their group cover. "We're warning you to back off."

The men gave him startled looks, clearly afraid, but Bluestreak did not feel guilty. These men were trying to take their friends away. After everything—aft er all of this—he would not let them destroy their unit. Not now. Not ever.

Not after everything that had happened.

Behind him, he could sense Vortex and Wildrider were just as defensive, growling and hissing, ready to fight the humans off. They would have his back. They always would—

Because this is what they were supposed to be: a family.
"What is goin’—WHAT TH’ FRAG IS ALL O’ THIS? !"

Bluestreak looked up, stunned, and saw what his battle programming identified as friends. Jazz, Thundercracker and Arcee were quickly crossing the threshold of the hangar, alarmed at the sight of the weapons surrounding the three mechs and four humans in the center of the room.

"They're trying to separate the humans from us!" Vortex snarled angrily in their own language, beating the soldiers to the chance of explaining themselves, with the truth or a lie.

Well, he wasn't too sure what sort of response they would have gotten if they had approached while Jazz, Thundercracker or Arcee had been there. They were trying their best to make peace, Bluestreak knew. He was sorry that they were now involved in this acrimonious altercation but they had not started it.

Thankfully, Jazz and Thundercracker seemed to know this. Instantly, Jazz's battle mask whipped down and he slid in front of Bluestreak, facing the humans in a similar defensive position as the gunner had taken. Thundercracker, looming, footsteps booming, stomped closer. He didn't need weapons to look aggressive. The humans immediately scattered, yelling as the jet walked toward the group dangerously as pure wall of intimidation.

"Back off, right now, all o' ya!" Jazz snapped loudly at the human soldiers who still dared to stand closer than was necessary to their group. "We're not tryin’ t’ cause any trouble, but if yer causing trouble fer us, any of us, we're not gonna just sit by an’ take it."

"What happened?" Arcee shouted, looking positively torn. She rolled up closer to Bluestreak as Thundercracker flanked on Vortex and Wildrider's side. "What do you mean, they tried to separate you?"

"That black-clothed guy, Simmons," Bluestreak began, frustration and anxiety welling up within his spark now, "he pointed something at the humans and then said they had to go with him. He started to grab Kass to drag her off! What else were we going to do, let them take her? What if they were going to hurt her? !"

Wildrider's engine was becoming deafening. "I'll kill them first!" he screeched. "No von hurts humans, not ours, definitely not ours!" His entire frame seemed to shake, either with rage or fear. "No more deaths, no more leaving—we are staying together!"

Vortex snarled and Bluestreak couldn't help but agree himself. They had to stay together, no matter whether they were in the wilderness or in a camp, surrounded by enemies or by friends. If they didn't—if they let other people or the world take each other away—

Bluestreak whined. How did it come to this? Years of simple living, the feeling of being home, loved, safe—

All of it gone in just a matter of days. It just wasn't fair.

"—it was for decontamination! You're all irradiated!" he heard one of the humans shout. "He wasn't going to hurt them! We just need to get you guys clean, or else you could affect other people! Please, calm down!"

The soldier's plea for order didn't work too well. Between engines roaring and the soldiers yelling and the mechs conversing hurriedly in Cybertronian, trying to keep calm, the whole garage was becoming a chaotic, noisy mess. Bluestreak's sensors alerted him to the approach of other mechs, however, so he knew to look to the South entrance. It was a huge signal, one he had learned was
Optimus'. Bluestreak's initial reaction was to feel relieved; they had Optimus there now!

But then realization struck him: Optimus was no longer his leader—and no longer an ally. Because Bluestreak… Bluestreak was not an Autobot.

He braced himself, as did the others; it was impossible to mistake his signal. When the large Autobot appeared, Ironhide and Sideswipe appearing behind him, Bluestreak immediately squashed his instinctual reaction to feel happy; he tried to feel scared. It wasn't too hard, really. Even if they had ten on their side, Optimus and Ironhide were legends by themselves; if they had to fight them… it didn't look too good.

Sideswipe and Ironhide brought out their weapons, but Optimus didn't bother. He walked up within a hundred yards of the poised ten survivors and just looked down on them.

"What is going on here?" the Autobot Prime demanded, optics hard and voice promising swift action if needed. It made Bluestreak afraid.

Before Bluestreak could explain again, one of the NEST soldiers spoke up. "They've got radioactive dust all over them and their gear," he said, angry. "We need to decontaminate it all. They could have infected the whole damn compound!"

Next to him, Jazz suddenly flinched. "Radioactive…" he repeated, confused. All at once the confusion vanished and was replaced with alarm. "Oh, slag!"

Rachel, suddenly visible from behind Vortex, made a choking sound. "What the hell?" she blurted. She seemed more angry than panicked. "We aren't radioactive! We've never been near one of the spill sites!"

Kass nodded nervously. "Yeah, w-we stayed away from Asia!" she added.

"It ain't us, it's th' dust," Jazz said, startling them. He looked at his hands and his battle mask retreated. He looked stunned. "All th' particles in th' air. Of course it would've fallen on us eventually."

"Wait, what?" Barns began, alarmed. He looked down at his chest and suddenly grew alarmed. "We have nuclear fallout on us—?!"

"No, no, just dust. It'll come off. You're not internally contaminated," Jazz said, trying to reassure them as well as keep the NEST and Autobot soldiers from holding their weapons out still. He looked at one of the human soldiers that had come into the hangar with him. "Where can we hose down, Will?"

The blond man gestured toward the outside of the hangar, to an area they hadn't been in yet. "We have mech-sized decontamination chambers for newly arriving 'Bots. We have smaller decontamination showers for the humans," he said. "It's all standard. Come on, we have to do this now, quick."

"I'm not leaving them alone!" Bluestreak suddenly exclaimed. Vortex looked at him, but nodded in agreement. That was not even a possible suggestion now; he didn't trust the soldiers. He could have trusted the Autobots, but not the new humans—

Images of unfriendly caravans and cannibals and strangers flashed over his processors. It wasn't right—

"Blue, we can't fit in a wash rack for humans—!" Jazz was saying, trying to be the peacekeeper.
Bluestreak shook his helm, refusing. Kass made a sighing sound and Danny hung onto her fiercely.

Without much prompt, Arcee rolled forward, catching their attentions. "I will go with them. I can fit in a human stall," she said. She looked down at Simmons and scowled deeply. "You were right to confront us about this, but not in this manner. Do not think you may harm the humans when we are not here."

"I wasn't!" Simmons exclaimed, scandalized. Bluestreak glared at him; he had never specifically disliked a human before, but now he did.

Barns suddenly surged forward again, looming with surprising height. "You are lucky I have no interest in being gunned down," he said darkly. He glared at Simmons, unafraid and obviously furious. "Do not… do not touch us. I will do more than hit you."

"Come on," Jazz said, stopping the fight from continuing. He looked at the four humans, frowning. "Follow th' soldiers. Arcee, watch 'em."

"I will," she replied, optics narrowed. She rolled forward and only then did anyone else move.

Bluestreak was forced to watch their four humans be escorted out of the hangar, Arcee vigilant behind them, and then the soldiers started to grab all of their gear. Their pillows, sleeping rolls, cooking supplies, clothing—everything. Wildrider hissed, but thankfully did not retaliate. None of them felt right watching it, Bluestreak surmised. It had been one thing to confiscate their weapons; it wasn't right to inflict this on the humans.

"I want our shit back!" Rachel shouted from outside the hangar. Barns grabbed her and hurried her along and they disappeared around the corner. Thundercracker scoffed.

The whine that rose up between them could have been Bluestreak's or Wildrider. Both looked back at Jazz plaintively. The smaller silver mech was watching the humans leave but then turned to face their group.

"That went so fragging well," he snapped, though the aggression was half-hearted. He motioned at those that remained. "Aight, decontamination room, now!"

Bluestreak obeyed, his sensors constantly seeking out the four humans they had just let go off on their own. He understood the worry NEST now had, but that didn't make him feel better. He ignored Optimus as he passed by, the mech suddenly not as awe-inspiring as before.

This place was not right.

"I do not like this place," Wildrider muttered lowly next to him.

"Me neither," Bluestreak replied, spark heavy.

Why… why had they come here?

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Jazz was angry.

No, he thought as he exited out of the mechs' decontamination chamber, not caring if he was the only mech in his group out of decontamination yet. He wasn't angry.

He was fucking PISSED.
"That was fraggin' stupid," he snarled, marching over to the drenched agent standing opposite him with Lennox and several other soldiers, all of whom had gone through the decontamination process. Everything and everyone on the base would have to be decontaminated now. "Look at me, Simmons, you little creep."

Simmons, for all of his uncomprehending ignorance, saw the incoming danger. "Hey, hey, I was doing my job!" he sputtered, backing up so far that he almost slipped on the puddle of water he had dragged with him.

Jazz didn't care if he was scaring the human. "FRAG THAT! I remember th' shit you pulled with Sam an' Mikaela. You ever touch any of these kids like that again, Wildrider will be th' least of your fraggin' worries!" he continued, purposely flexing his clawed hands overhead. He was pleased to see Simmons pale three more shades.

Almost out of nowhere to his left, Optimus appeared and he quickly stepped between Jazz and the humans. "Enough of this, Jazz," he ordered firmly.

"No, Prime." Jazz turned on him, unafraid, even when a sopping wet Ironhide and Sideswipe reappeared as well. He pointed up at Optimus fearlessly. "You make no mistake: we might be outta our element, but we're still t'gether." Trembling, Jazz gestured at himself and then at his own crew in the washracks. "They are still my responsibility, an' I am done fuckin' that up. No one, no one messes wit' th' kids. No one separates us. No one hassles us."

He was done losing people and not having bodies to bury. He was done screwing up his one responsibility—keeping the people he loved safe. He was done.

"We stay t'gether an' we protect each other," he snapped. "Period."

Optimus, equally undeterred, frowned deeply. If Jazz wasn't mistaken, he also saw regret in his optics.

"You don't have to worry about protecting them here, Jazz," he said, slowly. "We aren't your enemies."

Jazz glared. "Ain't th' vibe I'm gettin' here, Prime. We ain't yer enemy either, granted ya don't make us inta 'em yerselves."

"Come on, let's not fight, guys," Lennox suddenly spoke. He walked closer and the fact that he didn't seem afraid of Jazz was slightly reassuring. "We'll take care of the humans. I promise," the human said, looking specifically at Jazz now. "You knew me back in your world right? You know you can trust me."

That made Jazz hesitate. "I don't know fraggin' anythin' right now," Jazz managed to say, looking down at Lennox. "And I—"

At the hangar door, more mechs appeared. Jazz felt Ratchet first, his signal familiar even after fifty years of him being dead to Jazz. Next to him was the other Autobot, Jolt, and with Bumblebee missing, Jazz hadn't expected to see anyone else.

But no, of course, there was another.

Prowl stood behind Jolt, looking just as worried as the rest of them, but he stopped short of the threshold of the hangar when he saw the mechs standing there. He completely ignored the human soldiers, but that didn't strike Jazz as odd; he himself had just had the world drop out beneath his pedes.
Briefly, Jazz was very happy Thundercracker was still in the showers.

He wasn't the only one who noticed the tension. The entire room seemed to grow silent as Prowl walked up toward Prime, optics on Jazz. "...I apologize, Prime," he said, slowly. He looked around the room stiffly. "I heard the commotion."

"It's fine," Optimus said, glancing between both Jazz and Prowl. He probably saw Jazz's tight expression, so he proceeded cautiously. "Jazz... I take it you know Prowl."

Jazz felt his spark twist violently under his chestplates. "...Yeah." That was one way to put it.

The room was quiet as Prowl walked closer, stopping next to Optimus. Jazz was very, very glad Thundercracker wasn't there at the moment. The last thing they needed was an actual fight; the last thing Jazz needed was a fight between those two mechs.

"I'm not going to harm you," Prowl said, frowning. His doorwings were up defensively. The black-armored mech leaned a little closer. Jazz drew back farther. "I... I learned you were dead the moment I came to Earth. I never expected you to be alive ever again, especially like this—"

Jazz shook his helm, stepping back once more. "Don't talk t'me. Please," he got out, vocalizer threatening to malfunctioning. "Just don't."

He couldn't do this. Not now. Not now—

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Prowl challenged, optics narrowed. His doorwings also went down, betraying his emotions far more than his face did. To anyone unfamiliar with the motions, they would have just been nonsense; to Jazz, they spoke volumes—even years later. "What, in your world, do you hate me?"

Jazz tried to stop shaking. "In my world, I buried ya a long fraggin' time ago," he said harshly. He ignored Prowl's wince. "Leave me alone."

Prowl tensed up and stared at the smaller 'Bot in confusion, not understanding the emotions coming from him nor the meaning behind his demand. Jazz fought the urge to start screaming, at anyone—

"Prowl," Optimus suddenly said, his voice breaking through the intense silence like an avalanche. He turned around and gave Jazz a look that the other mech couldn't quite tell was sad or just sympathetic. "I understand that things were different for you. I am sorry, Jazz."

Apologies did nothing. They didn't bring people back to life. They didn't stop regret or self-hatred. Jazz, at one point, would have died to see Prowl one last time. Now, it filled him with uncontrollable grief.

He had buried that mech with his spark, fifty years in the future, only to give it to someone else.

And now... Prowl was alive. And so was he.

Jazz grabbed hold of his arms, which were shaking, and forced them to stop. "It's nothin' t' apologize for," he managed to say. He looked away from them all, even though Prowl's presence burned against his sensors. "I ain't th' Jazz you lost. I won't ever be. I ain't yer enemy, but I can't promise I'm th' same mech ya thought of as a friend." He looked back at Optimus, visor narrowed in pain. "I don't know you. An'... it's clear ya don' know me."

He wanted to look at these mechs as the friends he had lost, but everything was different now. This wasn't his home and these weren't the friends he had buried; he wasn't the friend they had lost either.
That did not make this easier, however.

Optimus watched him and seemed to consider his answer for a moment. "...That may be true," the Autobot leader replied quietly. "You don't have to fear us, Jazz. We must all learn as we go for now, but…"

Jazz turned back around and looked at his old friend face to face. Optimus looked down at him with sad optics. Between them, the void just... grew.

"We can always use your help," Optimus continued. He inclined his helm gently. "You were a good Autobot. You were my friend and one of my best officers. I know that much about you."

For their mutual survival, Jazz had been hoping to get an offer like that. He had to protect what was left of their group and if he could somehow prove himself useful to NEST now, they'd be secure here. What bothered him more than that, however, was the fear of having to work with the very people he had never, ever dreamed of seeing again. Optimus looked at him kindly, as did Ratchet, Bumblebee, even Ironhide...

But all that did was open old wounds. Jazz hoped it wouldn't kill him to just let it happen.

"I don't know what I can offer without risking my friends' safety yet, but..." he started, knowing it was for the best. "I'll help ya if I can, Prime. It's th' least I can do."

Lennox sighed and shook out more water from his hair. "We can use that help keeping everyone calm and not freaking out like that again," he said, a warning in his tone. "I'll talk t' them." Jazz laughed; the sound strangled in his vocalizer when he suddenly felt a surge of despair. He ignored how the other Autobots looked at him oddly. Everything hurt. "We lost… Wheeljack. We lost him th' moment we stepped foot in this time," he told them, feeling dizzy. "That was three days ago, man. Three days. Those kids are still grievin'." He gripped his helm with one hand and stared at the ground. "We all are. Ya can't blame us fer bein' on edge."

"We'll give them space," Lennox assured him. He looked honestly sympathetic. "And counseling, if need be."

"Thanks, man—an' I do mean it. I'm sure we all can use some." Jazz ran a heavy hand over his faceplates. He ignored the stares from the other mechs. He probably looked worse than ever. The thought irritated him, and brought him back to the crux of the issue they faced right now. His voice hardened as he continued, "But it'd help just's much fer ya t'keep Simmons on a leash an' for all o' ya ta stop looking at my mechs like they're about ta kill ya'all. Ya keep threatenin' an' harassin' 'em an' 'ventually somethin's gonna give. Just give us a chance t'know ya, fer ya'll t'know us. That'll go a long way t'helpin' things along." Jazz sighed, exhausted. "And fer th' love'a Primus, get their books an' stuff decontaminated and bring it back. Ain't bad enough ta lose a loved one, ya gotta lose ever'thin' reminds ya of him too." He turned away from them; he couldn't stand the stares. He sighed again.

Optimus moved closer, his frame creaking. Jazz could feel his optics piercing through his back armor. "It will get better, Jazz," the Autobot leader said. "You're in a safer place now. Your friends are safe here."

He wanted to believe that. Maybe... it could be. It was better than where they had come from. It was unknown, but they could adapt. They'd always adapted.

Maybe they could do this.
"...Yeah," he said quietly. "Just kinda hard t'keep rememberin' that."

Below him, Lennox walked past the speechless Simmons and gave Jazz a reassuring nod. "Leaving a warzone is tough," he said. "You guys have probably seen the worst of anything war can throw at you. You'll be fine."

Jazz stared back. "You have no idea," he said. Beyond them, the others began to file out of the washracks, and he looked toward them.

No idea at all.

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Four Days Later

After six hours of driving, two pit-stops and five consecutive games of I-Spy, Sam was more than grateful to reach the last check-point outside of NEST's compound.

He leaned out the window and grinned up at the security guard present at the gate's entrance. He wasn't going to comment on the state of the gate, since it was possible one of the mechs (Sideswipe came to mind) had broken it. Instead, he waved and introduced himself and Mikaela. The guard, a man he didn't know, smiled back and waved them through, Bumblebee honking as he rolled over the threshold onto the airstrip.

"All righttt," Sam said, stretching back with a gleeful expression. "It feels good to be recognized."

Next to him, Mikaela snorted into her bottle of iced tea. "That just gives them more of a chance to hunt you down if you ever screw up," she said unhelpfully.

Sam sputtered. "I won't!"

"I can't wait to see everyone," Mikaela said, cutting his tirade off. He sulked against the window. "Did they miss us?"

Bumblebee chuckled. "Yes, very much," he said, as they made a casual pace toward the receiving bay. "Ratchet was talking about your request to train with him just the other day."

"What about it?" Mikaela asked, suddenly far more attentive. Sam frowned; he and Mikaela had each offered their help to NEST, but where he'd been told to bug off and go to college first, it seemed like the powers-that-be actually considered Mikaela to be immediately useful.

"He thinks it would be a good idea to have a trustworthy human medic, just in case," Bumblebee answered, as expected. "When more of the Autobots arrive, we will need all the help we can get."

"Right." Mikaela smiled happily. "Well, I'll be glad to help."

"Yeah, yeah..." Sam glowered out the window, feeling much less happy than he had before. "At least you can help now."

Mikaela looked at him with sympathy and Bumblebee rumbled gently beneath them. "In due time, Sam," the Autobot said. Sam sighed.

"Hmph." The human peered out the window as they passed several soldiers. He couldn't see anything too out of the ordinary, but then again, he wasn't out here much. "So, are we gonna meet the new mechs?"
Bumblebee tensed up. Literally. Sam felt the seat shudder a little. "No," the Scout said, firm. "Not... yet."

Mikaela put the cap back on her bottle and put it back into her purse. "Why?" she asked, surprised. "I thought you said they were Neutrals. Doesn't that mean they're safe?"

"There are other concerns at the moment, but firstly, we have to let them get acclimated," Bumblebee said. He sounded agitated over something. "They have suffered a lot. They aren't ready to meet new people yet."

"Oh..." Sam frowned at the dash. He had heard only bits and pieces about the background of the new arrivals. They had survived some really awful things, courtesy of Megatron's actions, so Earth for them was almost paradise in comparison. He didn't know what that meant, but he could still feel bad. "Right."

"Don't worry," Bumblebee continued. "When the time is right, I'm sure introductions will be made."

Sam looked at Mikaela, who shrugged. Both of them had talked about how they'd like to meet the newcomers, whenever that would work out. Sam wanted to meet more Cybertronians in general, just because. He found them fascinating and they always seemed to view him the same way—

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw something far larger than a human move in the side mirror. Sam peered into the mirror as they turned. It was a mech, but none Sam had ever seen before, looming in the doorway of Hangar B, which he had thought was mostly storage. He was dark gray, almost like Prowl, but this one had propellers. For a second, he thought it was that one Decepticon from Mission City, but since he was walking willingly back into the hangar with several NEST soldiers, he could only be one thing.

"Who was that?" he asked, looking down at the dashboard.

Bumblebee said nothing. For a moment, Sam suspected Bumblebee had missed seeing the other mech, but when the silence was dragged out further, he realized that wasn't the case.

"That was one of the new guys?" he prompted, peering out the window. The helicopter mech was long gone, somewhere back in Hangar B.

"Yes. His name is Vortex," Bumblebee answered. He sounded strained. "Do not go near him, either of you, alone. He was once a Decepticon, and though he and the others claim to be unbiased now, I don't trust him, or the other two."

Mikaela glanced at Sam, both teens surprised. "Does Optimus?" she asked.

"I think so," Bumblebee replied. He rolled to a stop and added tersely, "But I don't."

That didn't exactly make either human feel better. "Okay," Sam agreed, nodding awkwardly. Mikaela shifted, uneasy.

Bumblebee came to a complete stop and the two grabbed their overnight bags and slid out. The yellow scout transformed, several NEST soldiers waving hello to him as they passed. Sam smirked; they were all so comfortable seeing the aliens now. He wondered if the rest of the world would ever be the same.

"Come on, Sam, Mikaela," Bumblebee announced. He looked down at them, smiling in that mouthless way he always did. "Let's see if Optimus will talk with you now about your school work."
Both smiling, Mikaela let Sam take her bag and the two headed in after their guardian. Sam wasn't sure if they'd get a chance to meet the new mechs while they were there, but he wouldn't turn the option down.

He just hoped that Optimus knew what he was doing.

End

Chapter 8

A/Ns:
- "Iron-sides" – yes that was on purpose. Because Simmons is a jerk and doesn't bother to get names straight. XD Sam is Example A.
- They're coming from a post-apocalyptic world where nuclear plants went Chernobyl all over the world, which was enough to cause minor radioactive dust clouds to drift over time. It was the clothing that had the dust, though, so it's not like the humans or the mechs are suddenly glowing. Otherwise, the humans wouldn't still be alive. ;/ (Thanks, dad, for helping me with all of that!)
- In case you're reading this without having read the first story, "Fallout," the reason Jazz is emo is because in his timeline, he finally accepted that Prowl was (most likely) dead and he moved on (with Thundercracker). You can see why this would be sort of awkward now.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Some things never changed. Even about aliens.

"Hey, it's the Witwicky kid!" Sideswipe crowed the moment Sam walked into Hangar C, Mikaela beside him. "And the hot chick!"

Sam grinned and waved at the red mech, who had been talking with several NEST soldiers he could almost remember the names for. "Hey, guys!" he called back.

Mikaela scowled. "Hello to you, too," she said irritably.

Sideswipe glided up on his wheel-enabled feet and stopped a few feet away. "Aww, I was just messing. Welcome back, you two!" he laughed. Mikaela sighed, but ended up smiling anyway; few could resist Sideswipe's charm after all. The red mech looked over at Bumblebee, curious. "I thought they weren't gonna come by until next week."

"Optimus got Keller to sign off on an early visit," the yellow scout replied simply. He peered down at Sam and Mikaela with smiling optics. "Come on, let's go find Ratchet and Optimus."

The base wasn't that large or complex, which always struck Sam as funny. He'd spent what felt like years of his life listening to Miles Lancaster, his best childhood friend, rant about conspiracy theories, which tended to be elaborate and expensive, with secret underground chambers and filled with alien technology. Sam was sure no alien conspiracy theorist would expect to find a "real" Area-51 like this one, made out of a collection of regular hangars, performing data intelligence work with standard, government issue PCs and scrounging for money all the time. Although he figured the take-over of the national park was somewhat diabolical. He was just glad it was close to where he lived, otherwise meeting Bumblebee even once in a while would be impossible.

They started walking after Bumblebee when two more mechs appeared at the end of the hall. "Hello, Sam, Mikaela," Ratchet said, noticing them before Ironhide did. The giant black Autobot looked more ticked off than usual, however.

"Hey, Ratchet!" Mikaela called back. She smiled over at Ironhide politely. "Hello, Ironhide. How's it going?"

"Like the Pit," Ironhide abruptly snapped. He continued marching past them without a second glance.

Sam balked at the suddenness of the mech's actions. "What the hell is his problem?" he asked, looking back at Ratchet and Sideswipe. Mikaela shrugged, unnerved as well.
"He has never quite mastered the art of being a patient jailer," Ratchet replied dryly. He did nod back at both humans and smiled. "Regardless, welcome back."

"Jailer?" Sam frowned and wanted to ask what that was supposed to mean, but the question was quickly forgotten when he saw Optimus Prime stepping out of the conference room behind Ironhide and Ratchet.

Sam couldn't help but grin as the Autobot leader approached them, Major William Lennox hanging back to speak with an aide. "Optimus," he greeted, instantly cheerful again.

"Hello, both of you," the giant said, smiling back. He looked more human without his battle mask on. He looked at both teenagers, acknowledging them specifically in a way that most human adults never bothered to do. "It's nice to see you again so soon."

"So soon?" Sam repeated, scoffing. "It's been like three weeks!" Bumblebee blurted out a string of apologetic radio voices and his eye guards drooped guiltily.

Optimus chuckled. "We've been busy. Forgive us, Sam, for keeping Bumblebee away for that long."

Mikaela made a pouting expression that made Sam grin. "I bet you just forgot about us," she complained, teasing. Bumblebee laughed.

"We'd never forget about you, Mikaela," Optimus replied, shaking his head with a smile of his own. He looked to his right and nodded at the medic standing there. "Ratchet, I believe you wanted time to meet with Mikaela?"

"Yes," the medic replied. He sighed and gave Mikaela a look one normally reserved for mundane household chores, though Sam knew the mech was actually pleased to see them. "You were serious about learning how to treat mechs?"

Mikaela grinned. "Yes!" she exclaimed. She took her bag from Sam's hands, her grin morphing into something apologetic. "Sorry, Sam, I'll be back soon."

Sam sighed as he watched his girlfriend jog after Ratchet, clearly excited. Any chance to help the mechs out was a good thing, though; if Sam was going to work on getting into NEST, he had to let Mikaela grab her chances too. Even if she got in faster or easier, he thought glumly.

"Soon! It takes vorns for a medic to learn how to properly care for a patient!" Ratchet exclaimed as they walked away, probably to the room he had taken over as a med-bay.

"Yeah, well, I've only got one, Ratchet, so you'd best get a move on …" Mikaela shot back.

Sam frowned as they disappeared into the maze of container units, computers and other miscellaneous NEST property that littered the hangar bay behind them. Someday, he thought.

"Heya, Sam," Lennox said as he strode up, breaking into his thoughts. He shook Sam's hand firmly, smiling and just as friendly as always. "Good to see ya."

"Yeah, you too," Sam replied. Smiling, he tuck his hands into his jeans, surveying the two figures in front of him and Bumblebee next to him. They were alone, so he figured it was okay to talk about it. "So, ah, what's been keeping you busy? The new mechs?"

Instantly, the hallway seemed to grow quiet… tense… and cold. Very cold. Sam blinked and glanced back up at Optimus, wary. Lennox looked like he was about to start cursing and Optimus just looked… well, kind of pissed.
Next to Sam, Bumblebee suddenly shrank back wards.

"...Bumblebee," Optimus began gravely, optics narrowed dangerously.

Sam felt a gasp strangle in his throat. "Oh, shit, wait, was I not supposed to know about that? You said there were other classified things you couldn't tell me, not that!" he cried. He was more alarmed when the glares shifted to Bumblebee, who whined and tried to sink down farther in on himself. Sam jumped forward, waving his hands quickly to get the attention back on himself. "Wait, wait, it's my fault, I cried. Only me and 'Kaela heard, I swear!"

Lennox, thankfully, turned his glare back on him. "How much do you know?" he demanded. He sounded more frustrated than actually angry, however.

"Just that there are new mechs!" Sam exclaimed. He quickly tried to think of a way to cover for their mutual screw-up. "A-and it's not like that's such a secret anyway, I saw one of them over by the other hangar door."

That didn't exactly help. "Jesus Christ..." Lennox groaned, slapping a hand over his face. He looked around and then fixed the teenager with a weary look. "Sam..."

"I don't know anything else!" Sam said, defensive. That was true. He only knew there were new mechs. Well, some of them were ex-Cons, but he didn't think what they were would really matter in the long run.

Bumblebee nodded, reluctant. "It's true. I only told him there were new mechs. It's my fault," he said, accepting the blame without complaint, because he was Bumblebee and he did things like that.

"No, I pressured you," Sam insisted. He saw Optimus and Lennox exchange incredulous looks and glared back at them. "I could totally pressure him into telling me if I wanted to. Obviously. And I did! You know 'Bee would never have said anything otherwise."

Optimus sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose-like thing. Sam doubted it was an actual nose. "You're not in trouble, Sam," the Autobot leader said, looking down at the teenager. "I trust you."

"I do too, but Sam, you have to be careful," Lennox added, sounding exasperated. "This stuff is serious."

"I know, Will. I know," Sam replied, feeling meek. Man, did he ever know how to screw things up. "As far as I know, no one else knows. And neither of us will say word to anyone else. I promise!"

If he could keep a secret about his car being alive for over two years, he could definitely keep this a secret. Sam knew they couldn't tell him everything, but what little they could was safe with him.

Optimus and Bumblebee definitely exchanged words electronically, because Bumblebee looked increasingly cowed, but after a moment, Optimus looked back down at Sam.

"Sam, walk with me," he said, turning, leaving little room for Sam to do otherwise. Not that he would refuse to walk with the Autobot leader, anyway.

"Bee's not in trouble, is he?" Sam asked desperately as they walked away from the command room and headed for the outside. At least the Autobots could walk around the base, sort of, without fear of being spotted.

"Of course not," Optimus said. He now, thankfully, seemed more pleasant than he was before. Sam
had to jog to keep up with him, even though he was sure the Autobot was practically walking in slow-motion for the human. "I was going to speak with you about the matter myself, although perhaps not so soon."

Sam winced. "Sorry." He sincerely hoped Lennox wouldn't make a big deal out of it; he didn't like the idea of pissing off a potential future employer.

Optimus chuckled. "It's alright, Sam. No harm was done," he said, denying the seriousness of it. "We can discuss it later. For now, Bumblebee informed me that you wanted to speak with me about something specific today?"

They passed some more soldiers and Sam stumbled mentally as they left the hangar. "Yeah. Uh, yeah," he managed to say. He felt awkward just coming out and asking Optimus for a request after screwing that all up moments ago. "I mean, um, it's kind of a request, so I understand if you say no."

"What is it, Sam?" Optimus prompted gently, looking down at him. Infinite patience, that one.

Sam took a deep breath. "Well… I want to help. With you guys. NEST. The whole works," he said. "A-and I know it'll be a while, Simmons gave me the whole run-down on how I have no experience and how ridiculous it is for me to think I can work with you guys officially right now. Lennox probably had to sell his kid to get me in here as it is."

To Sam's surprise, Optimus scowled. "That I don't think I'll ever understand. You are not a security risk, Sam," he said, shaking his head. "I would have you given unrestricted access to this compound if I had my say."

Well, that made him feel a million times better, actually. "I know you would. Heck, you're the only reason I bet 'Bee is allowed off grounds so much," Sam replied, smiling.

"You and he both deserve time together," Optimus replied. "You work well with one another and have saved each other's lives several times. You saved my life, Sam."

Sam almost tripped over empty air. "N-no, no, it's fine," he stammered. "I didn't do much." In fact, he really couldn't figure out where he had saved anybody. He just did whatever he'd had to do, even during Mission City—

"You killed our greatest nemesis. My greatest nemesis, Sam," Optimus began, slowing down to a stop. He peered down at the human, smiling in amusement. "You saved your planet and all of us. You did much. More than you realize, and more than your government will recognize."

Mikaela and his mother had called him a hero and his father had told him he had "done them proud," but Sam had never really thought about it. He just did what had to be done, as always. He might have done some things out of the norm, like killing Megatron, but… sometimes it was difficult to fathom how large of an impact that'd actually had on the world.

It him feel very, very small sometimes.

"I guess..." he murmured, shoving his hands into his pockets again to keep from fidgeting like an idiot.

Optimus stood up straighter, gleaming red and blue in front of the container unit they had stopped next to. "I understand your frustration of wanting to help," the Autobot leader said. "You remind me of a mech I have heard much about from Prowl," he said abruptly, surprising Sam. "This mech, he is with the new group you have not seen yet."
Sam blinked. "Oh…"

"He was a survivor of a genocidal attempt Megatron made against one of our strongest city-states, Praxus," Optimus continued, expression and voice growing graver as he went along. "Most of the population there was wiped out, save a few lucky mechs, such as Prowl and Bluestreak." The last name was unfamiliar, so he must have been one of the new guys. "I was in Iacon at the time, but I have learned from Ratchet that although he was very young, Bluestreak demanded that he be admitted into the Autobot ranks to avenge his people."

"I don't want vengeance… just…" Sam began, unable to voice his intentions. He didn't really know how else to say them, in fact. "I want to help."

He just wanted to be there, because no matter what he did, this was part of his life from now on. He could have gone to school for business or anything at all, but he would still have had a talking car. He would still have nightmares about Decepticons crashing down overhead. No matter what he did, he would still be Sam Witwicky. That mattered more than anything, he figured.

"A common plea for soldiers like yourself and Bluestreak," Optimus stated, optics bright. He smiled in a way that could soothe any kind of internal drama. "It is not a plea of the useless. It is a plea that I have heard from some of my most brilliant and dedicated soldiers."

Sam ran a hand through his hair, suddenly unsure of what he was thinking or saying. "I want to go to school to learn something that will be useful, so that I can work for NEST. I…" he started, failing. "I wanted to see if you'd, you know, sign off on the idea. Like, once I graduate and have a résumé to hand in to whoever, I guess Keller, maybe…" He laughed awkwardly and gave the mech a sheepish grin. "I could use you as a reference?"

To his relief, Optimus laughed as well. It was a kind gesture. "Sam…" he began, shaking his head slowly. "I would be more than happy to support you in your endeavors to join NEST. Working alongside you would be a great honor."

"Really?" Sam exclaimed, heart soaring. He was grinning like an idiot, no doubt, but he didn't care. "Thanks, Optimus! I swear, I won't let you down!"

Optimus started moving again, this time back toward the hangar, letting the human be excited. "I am curious," he began, his questioning tone bringing Sam back down to Earth. "Why do you not enter the United States military? That is another way you could be admitted to NEST."

Sam hesitated and then smiled wanly up at the Autobot. "I asked Lennox about that and he told me not to. Apparently it would take more time to reach the level that NEST soldiers need, get the clearance and rank and experience and all, than if I go the academic route," he said, shrugging. It had been an option for a while, but when he weighed his options, it didn't seem like the better one. "Not to mention that I probably wouldn't even make it past basic training. I'm not really soldier material, you know?"

"There are many types of soldiers, Sam. You are brave and strong, on many levels," Optimus began, sounding both wise and amused again. Sam was jealous of his patience. "Do not think you matter any less than Lennox or myself, even if you aren't part of NEST yet."

"Even Mikaela gets to help out more than I do, with repair work," Sam complained, gesturing back toward the med-bay. "I feel useless."

"You aren't," Optimus replied firmly. "Go to school and do what you must to prove to NEST and the government that you would be able to assist us. Just know one thing, Sam." He gave Sam a
reassuring look that meant a lot more than even his words did. "For the Autobots and myself, you have already proven yourself useful. If we had our way, you'd already be here with us."

To hear it from the Autobot leader was outstandingly comforting. "…Thanks, Optimus," he said quietly, meaning it. He could get there; he just needed to be as patient as his friends were.

"It's my pleasure," Optimus replied, amused again. Well, he was until he seemed to remember something else and he stopped walking, forcing Sam to look up at him expectantly. "Also, Sam. Bumblebee mentioned you wanted to meet the new mechs on the base."

Oops. Sam hesitated, not sure if he should say yes or not. "Yeah," he said, awkward. "Well, whenever it would work for you guys, of course. He said some of them were a bit, um, unsafe."

Optimus sighed and shook his head. "They are safe as long as we don't threaten them," he said firmly.

And then, shocking Sam, Optimus hesitated. He looked almost… reluctant. The Autobot peered around them and then slowly knelt down in front of the human. Having that giant face in front of him was even more startling than having to look up two and half stories to talk to him.

"Sam… I may have a job for you now," Optimus began, sounding careful. "One that I think even Simmons and Director Keller would approve of."

That was the last thing Sam had expected to hear that day. "Wh-what?" he exclaimed. He stuttered, adding, "Sure, what can I do?"

The hesitance was back for a brief moment. "There are more than just new mechs, Sam," Optimus replied lowly. His optics almost dimmed as he said, "There are humans."

For the life of him, Sam had no words to say, or think. He stared at Optimus, speechless, the sounds of the base droning on behind them, unheeded.

"…What?" Sam finally managed to ask, mind reeling.

Humans? Humans… with the mechs?

"There are ten survivors, but four of them are humans," Optimus replied, sounding grave again. "We are having difficulties reaching them, diplomatically speaking, so I had the idea that perhaps we are going about it the wrong way, with NEST soldiers being their only liaisons."

Sam peered at the Autobot in shock. "…What do you mean, 'survivors'?" he repeated. For some reason, he felt wary. Very, very wary.

Optimus looked down at him with a severe look that suddenly made the entire area feel ten degrees cooler again.

"We have much to explain," he said. He inclined his head at Sam, optics larger than ever so close to him. "I trust you Sam, so I will tell you the truth. Afterwards, I must ask for your help."

Sam tried to keep up with everything he had just been told, or not told specifically. "But what could I possibly…?" he began, still stunned.

"Let me explain. I'm sure you'll have many questions and I hope I can answer them," Optimus began, standing upright. He looked across the hangar, his gaze distant. "If I can't, I think we may have to introduce you to our guests sooner than expected."
None of this felt like good news. Sam hated bad news, even if he knew he would have to get used to it. Everything felt off about this turn of events, however. He didn't know why, but having humans show up with these other mechs was unnerving. Sam didn't believe in being superstitious, but he couldn't deny the uneasy feel of his gut.

But if Optimus trusted him with something as big as this… he just had to roll with it.

Sam nodded up at the mech, bracing himself. "Alright. I'm listening."

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All in all, Barns had to admit, things could have been worse.

Death, of course, was the poorest alternative to their current predicament that he could think of, although sometimes he wasn't entirely convinced they weren't dead and this wasn't some odd form of the afterlife. He hadn't thought he would need to eat in Heaven, but the fresh food that they enjoyed for the first time in… well, ever… was divine. Even if it consisted mostly of ham sandwiches, hot coffee, and canned vegetables with expiration dates that hadn't passed by decades ago.

At the same time, Barns knew that neither he nor any of his companions had slept easily for the last week. They were in an unfamiliar land, perhaps a whole different world all together, and they were surrounded by people they could one-hundred percent guarantee were not their allies and couldn't be fully trusted.

It seemed silly, because Barns knew that the Autobots were good creatures. They had defended Earth until the end, ultimately getting killed off in the same war that had annihilated his own species. The fact that there were human soldiers on the base should have made things easier as well; if this was the past, Barns knew he, they, should trust NEST. They were only trying to protect Earth from future harm, potentially Barns' world's version of it.

But they did not sleep well, the ten survivors, because they themselves were representative of the danger that might come and because of who and what their hosts were. While Barns, Danny, Kass and Rachel might have been exempted from possible permanent incarceration due to their species, that did not mean they would be unharmed or allowed free. Barns had heard from Goddard how desperate military leaders could become under stress. Also, they didn't want to be set free if the mechs were not.

And the mechs' case worried Barns even more than his own well-being. While Jazz was acting as if this were just another camp and another step toward survival, he was just as nervous, probably thinking the same thing Barns was. While the ten all knew that Wildrider, Vortex and Thundercracker were as harmless as any one else in their group (politically neutral when left alone, dangerous when threatened), NEST did not believe it. The human commanders, Lennox and Keller, had said they would deal with the mechs as they would any other political refugees, and those two had been fair in their dealings with his family. But Barns couldn't hide a twinge of fear every time he saw another NEST soldier look their way, judging and waiting.

"The only reason we aren't in a brig is because they haven't *built* one yet," Vortex had grouched. Jazz sent him a look begging for patience, but no one openly argued against that opinion.

Barns felt nervous every time the new Autobots were around, even more so than when the human soldiers were there. The smaller blue Autobot wasn't too bad and he wasn't sure where the yellow one disappeared to. But he didn't like the black one called Ironhide—he was aggressive and clearly biased against them. In Barns' eyes Ironhide posed the most danger to them, because he had the experience and the firepower to do a lot of damage in a short amount of time, if he chose to.
However he particularly disliked the rude red one that would often throw snide comments toward Wildrider, Vortex and Thundercracker, the three members of his family who were barely holding it together as it was because of their innate distrust of the Autobots.

And then, of course, there was Prowl, the police car. Barns had never pried into Jazz's previous relationship with the Autobot (a tactician, interestingly enough), but now he wished he had gossiped more. The tension in the room that naturally existed whenever all the mechs were together increased tenfold when both Prowl and Jazz were there. It was even worse when Thundercracker was there, because he looked ready to tear Prowl in half… something Barns was pretty sure was entirely plausible. None of them wanted to deal with the consequences of that, however; Optimus Prime was more than capable of taking Thundercracker on solo.

The only Autobot who was half-way calm around the survivor mechs was the medic, Ratchet, and that seemed to be because of a new bias he had after witnessing Thundercracker's memories. The medic knew what they had all gone through, believing them with far more intensity than Prime or Major Lennox ever would. Barns normally disdained sympathy, but for now, it was their chief resource. At least that ensured they'd continue to get food and care.

What that meant for him and the three other humans in their group was unclear. They had received new clothing and took their meals with their own mechs as they always had, without NEST officials throwing any sort of fit. They had given up trying to remove them from the mechs' after their many panic attacks earlier that week, so they were all a little calmer by the fifth day.

Barns had more to worry about than having a bed or fresh food, however: Danny.

She'd said about twenty words total since they were dumped in this new world. She ignored anything but the most essential of requests and duties. She was aware of some things; she got scared if people got too loud or the mechs argued or if someone threatened them. But Barns watched as Danny silently went through their days sitting in that hangar just… staring. She didn't cry. She didn't have nightmares…

She just looked out the hangar doors, as if waiting for something else to happen.

It broke his heart, and it hurt even worse when he realized that no matter what he did, Barns would not be able to give her peace.

He himself had not grieved; in fact, none of them had had the time to sit down and reflect on what had happened. To Barns, most of their time there seemed almost too fast, too unreal. It felt like a dream. He wished it were.

Barns laughed at himself, ignoring the stares it earned him, when they were all alone in that giant empty room.

He would have given up every bed, every bit of food, every drop of uncontaminated water and every piece of clean cloth for the rest of his short life—if only to go back and stop Wheeljack from ever suggesting they use that damn bridge.

But they had no bridge here with them. They couldn't go back. Ever.

They had left their world, far, far behind them, and were trapped in this new one. It didn't matter if the Autobots incarcerated them or killed them or just let them go. Because as far as this world knew, none of them existed. None of them mattered.

None of their suffering would ever even matter now.
When he closed his eyes, he saw the drones. He saw the forests of his homeland and he was running through them. The forest turned into long metal hallways that never ended, never gave him reprise from running. He was all alone, because the others were dead and *he was all alone* and when he finally couldn't run, he fell—

And he fell hard.

Barns awoke from those dreams drenched in sweat and breathing as if he had been running all that while. His heart pounded almost painfully and he felt cold, even as the August air around them in the open hangar was warm.

Throat strangled, Barns sat up and grasped his head with both hands. He felt everything move around him, like the Earth was rolling away from where he sat, also leaving him behind, like everyone else.

It was foolish. All around him, there were bodies in sleep or recharge. He was not alone. He wouldn't be alone ever, because if death took the others, it would surely take him at that time too. Because they were together.

Barns took deep breaths of air, but everything still felt cold. He wanted to just walk. Or run. But he couldn't, because they weren't allowed to run.

They had to, though. They had to keep moving, because if they stopped, they'd die. He knew that. They all did. They had to keep moving moving moving or else they'd be slaughtered, just like Goddard, or the Hall family, or Wheeljack—

"Barns?" a soft voice to his left asked. A hand, small and feminine grabbed his shoulder.

"Je ne peux pas …" he started. He swallowed and wiped a hand over his face, which was wet from more than just sweat. "Sorry. I'm sorry." He hoped he hadn't screamed in his sleep. Judging by the fact that only two of the others were awake told him he hadn't.

Kass drew her hand back and sat patiently as she observed him. "It's okay, mate," she said, calmly. "Relax."

Bluestreak, as it turned out to be, leaned closer toward the two conscious humans. "What's the matter?" he asked, in the same quiet voice; there was no point waking the others. Barns was glad Bluestreak was on watch duty and not Wildrider. He had become dangerously unhinged by everything that had happened.

"Dreams. Just dreams," Barns said, still wiping his face. He looked around and couldn't tell from the lighting outside what time it was. It felt odd having clocks hanging on walls, but it wasn't like he could see them now. "What time is it?"

"Four fifteen," Bluestreak replied helpfully. He kept his optics on him as he leaned in closer. "Are you okay, Barns? You're breathing really hard."

Barns tried to laugh, but the sound was hoarse and alien to his own ears. "Dreams, Blue," he replied, glancing the Autobot's way.

"Want to get some water?" Kass asked, still whispering. Although the entire hangar had had to be
decontaminated, they still had access to the bathroom which had sinks with running water.

*Running water.* If she had been coherent, Danny would have been fascinated by the concept. Barns himself found it difficult not to play around with the faucets when he was alone in there.

"No," he said, shaking his head. He just wanted sleep. Restful, uninterrupted sleep.

Kass could sense his despair the same way she had always had, whenever things had gotten bad for them. They all looked out for each other like that. Although, usually he was the one giving the sympathy—not receiving it. It felt wrong.

"Barns…" she began, sounding upset.

He tried to wave her concern away. It was too soon for this. "It's fine," he lied.

"No," Kass replied firmly. "No, it's not."

Barns hated the fact that it wasn't just him who saw through lies or moods. They were all skilled at deciphering each others' actions and emotions in the worst of times. He couldn't afford to lose his own cool when there were some in their group who weren't even *speaking*. He had to be stronger. He had to be there for *them*.

When Kass gently placed her hand on his shoulder again, Barns almost sobbed.

"Why did we come here?" he asked the air, not directing his question at anyone. Beside him, Kass gripped his shoulder tighter and Bluestreak's optics dimmed even more.

"I don't know, Barns," Kass answered. She sounded sad.

Barns rubbed his eyes again. "Danny still isn't talking. Not to me. Or Wildrider, even," he said, though he was sure Kass had noticed that. "He doesn't look good either."

"Can you blame them?" Kass asked with a small sigh.

"Give them time," Bluestreak added quietly. He made a small mechanical whining sound. "It takes time."

Barns closed his heavy eyes. "I know." They all did.

"What do you think will happen to us now?" Kass wondered. She sat back and released his shoulder. "They are still trying to decide. It's taking bloody forever."

Bluestreak tilted his head at them, his optics proving it more than an actual image of his face did. "Well, they won't hurt us. They won't," he assured them. He sounded sure of himself. "And I know they are trying to make things better for you four especially."

"I don't want better if it does not include the rest of us," Barns replied, shaking his head. They were a unit of ten, not ten individuals. "They should treat us as our own entity, not just some Autobots, some humans, or some Decepticons."

"I agree," Kass said. The cot creaked as she shook her head. "I don't think they'll try to separate us again." Barns started to complain about that comment, but Kass cut his complaint off knowingly. "Oh, Barns, *please*. The whole decontamination thing was necessary, though that guy was a bloody jerk."

Barns looked away, frowning. "Perhaps." He could appreciate the medical concerns, but these
people needed to learn tact.

Kass sighed. "Ha..." She was probably smiling, out at the darkness that seemed to encircle their meager encampment. "I am so tired," she said.

"Same," he replied. Everything felt heavy, from his eyes to his heart.

Bluestreak loomed more overhead. When he spoke though, it was comforting, however. "Try to get some sleep," he said.

Kass patted Barns' shoulder once before laying back down and Barns tried to imitate her calm acceptance of their situation. It would not help any of them to panic or refuse NEST's help. They needed the assistance, no matter how much it threatened to rip their nerves to shreds.

Barns laid back and tried to imagine himself a million miles away from everything. It didn't help.

When he shut his eyes, all he saw were one-eyed monsters that tore through his flesh, and when he woke up to blaring yellow sun, he woke up believing he was dead.

He woke up and died a lot that first week.

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Keller had just landed back on California soil on the base's heli-pad when he received a frantic request to convene at the tech center with Prowl and Lieutenant Epps. It wasn't good news either, judging by how panicked the entire tech crew seemed when he walked into the large room.

"Epps, speak to me!" Keller barked as he hurried over to the far wall, where soldiers were working on what looked like a repeat signal of what the NSA had found in Qatar two years ago. He looked up at the black-and-white mech standing by the overhead catwalk with Epps. "Hello, Prowl."

Prowl looked down at Keller respectively. "Hello, Director. One moment," he said, going back to helping Epps with something.

When the government had offered to build a computer installation here on the base that could rival that of the NSA, the Autobots had accepted. However, Ratchet and Prowl had reprogrammed the most powerful mainframe to process the data in a more advanced way, which made it the computer they used primarily for decryption and to aid Prowl in his tactical analyses. Although he wasn't a tech, Epps had spent a lot of time helping Sideswipe install the Cybertronian tech, so he'd gotten pretty good at using this highly advanced piece of equipment.

"We have the feed up," he told the Autobot before looking back down at Keller, still on the lower level, his expression strained. "Director Keller. An unexpected Cybertronian signal was picked up by NSA again this afternoon. It's most likely Autobot. Our translation software still isn't up, so Prowl's here to translate," he explained to Keller.

John Keller balked at that. They had not been expecting to hear from any more Cybertronians, at least on their side, until the forward crew they had cleared was approaching. That was a month away, however.

Without warning, the room was filled with an echoing, eerie sound that resembled electronic feedback more than language. But to Prowl and Sideswipe, who had escorted Keller there, it was understandable. Both mechs peered at the screen and the audio wave pattern, entranced.

"Wait... what? What's happening?" Keller demanded, trying to get answers as soon as possible.
"Director, please," Prowl muttered. He listened for a moment longer before making a sharp sound. "Primus..."

Sideswipe gaped at the screen. "Aw, shit," he said, his despair more alarming than anything else.

"What is happening?" Keller demanded, even louder. He waved his hand at the group in front of him, not caring who spoke up. "Someone talk to me!"

"That was a distress signal from the shuttle carrying the Autobot forward unit from Hyperion," Prowl summarized quickly. His door panels were flying up and down his back erratically; Keller had suspected they had something to do with body language, but it wasn't like they had the time to study it. "They received fire from what they assume is Starscream's trine and possible additional Decepticon forces."

"Oh, God—," Keller managed. Starscream, the mech on everyone's most wanted list at this point, was actually nearby? "They found him?! Where?!"

Prowl kept playing the message, the warbling thankfully not so deafening now. "Your dwarf planet, Pluto," the tactician replied. "He was using the distance to hide himself and his ensemble. We aren't sure how many." Suddenly, Prowl drew away from the console and hissed. "Curses."

Keller braced himself. "What?" he asked, dreading bad news.

"They're approaching Earth now," Prowl announced. Epps whipped around on the catwalk and gave Prowl a startled look, while Keller personally felt like fainting.

"Who is? !" he demanded, mind racing. Starscream and the Decepticons or—?

"The forward team," Prowl answered, sounding peeved. The message had stopped at that point. "They will be arriving by week's end."

Epps opened his mouth to speak, but Keller beat him to it. "What? !" he exclaimed, rounding as best he could on the two-story alien. "It was supposed to take another month for them to get here!" They had been preparing for the forward team, but had not expected them to arrive so soon!

Prowl glanced at Keller, scowling. "I do not know why they will arrive so early!" he replied shortly. He looked back at the screen and looked even more agitated. "Primus, if the information they have sent about the size of Starscream's forces is true, they're lucky to be alive."

"Are you sure it's them?" Epps asked, worried.

"That signal is encrypted," Prowl answered. He paused and looked back at Sideswipe with a look that could only be sarcastic. "Good news, Sideswipe, your brother is only a few days away."

Sideswipe made a whooping sound by the door. "Yes!" he cried, ecstatic. Prowl sighed.

For everyone else in the room, including Epps and Keller, there were no reasons to cheer. "This is—this is unacceptable!" Keller exclaimed, grasping his head. He spun around, angry. "Where is Prime?!"

Prowl frowned down at the DNI. "They are early, but this was planned for, John," he replied slowly.

"Oh? And the six other mechs in Hangar B?" Keller shot back, unable not to be furious. This was completely ridiculous. "How the hell am I going to explain this, Prowl?!"
"The truth," the Autobot replied, blunt as ever. "This is beyond our control."

"Well, it shouldn't have been!" Keller shouted. Epps had the decency to sheepishly excuse himself from the room to go let Lennox know, leaving Keller to rail at the two robots and a human tech team that were out of their element. "Goddamn it—Washington is going to eat me alive because of this! This means we're going to have ten Autobots running around, plus those other six mechs, some of whom are ex-Decepticons!" he said. "This is completely out of control."

"What would you have them do, Director? Turn around? Fly back into an ambush and be killed by Starscream?" Prowl demanded, facing him completely. He tilted his head at the human, looking almost curious. "This is no longer about interspecies politics, or Washington rhetoric. We are here to save your planet. This is about more than what humanity likes. This is about what it needs."

Keller glared at him; he had stopped being intimidated by their height months ago. "Don't you lecture me on what this is. I know what this is," he snapped. "I know, God help us, we need you 'Bots, but Prowl, you have to understand, Earth isn't ready—"

Sideswipe made a scoffing sound, but Prowl cut him off with a glare. "Ready for what? Answers?" the Autobot tactician said, looking back at Keller patiently. "The time for the truth to be revealed is not going to wait for you or your superiors to feel better about your roles in all of this. This coming war will not wait for you to find a way to turn the situation to your political advantage. Mankind's greatest strength is its unity as one species, something our race no longer has. Do not waste that resource, Director."

He hated when the robots had a point against what he had to do. Perhaps teaming up with the smartest 'Bot had been a mistake; most of D.C.'s finest couldn't hold a candle to Prowl's intellect or logic, though Keller knew that might help them in the long run. At least he hoped it would.

"...Goddamn it," Keller muttered. He ran a heavy hand over his face. "Obama is going to rake me over the coals for this one." At least Michelle wasn't in on the NEST situation, because she probably would do worse.

Prowl nodded. "I will let Optimus know and I know he will take responsibility for the situation," he said. He looked at the door pointedly. "For now, we must prepare for the influx of Autobots arriving. Four is better than having the entire Hyperion crew arriving, after all."

Keller wished there were fewer names to remember. "How many Autobots were on that ship again?" he asked, distracted.

"The Hyperion hosts a forty-nine mech crew." Prowl paused, optics flashing as he retrieved the data he needed. "Galaxus has sixty-seven." Sideswipe snickered.

Sweet Jesus.

Keller did his best not to swear; that was Lennox's job. Instead, he ground his teeth together and stomped away from the tech center entrance. He heard the telltale sounds of metal feet walking behind him at a sedate pace, so he knew Prowl was following. Keller also tried not to imagine over a hundred mechs actually existing, let alone walking around or being anywhere near Earth, because at that point, they definitely would have to make the call to announce the truth to the world.

He hoped he was either dead, retired, or just too senile at that point in the future to be the one to make that call.

As they walked, Prowl was initially quiet, but Keller knew the mech very well at this point. He was
smart—a genius by all standards—and had quickly mastered the art of human politics, if one could call it an art. However, he could use work on his subtlety.

"I do not think mentioning the bringing down of the *Ark* to Earth soil and the help it would offer to house the influx of Cybertronians is needed at this point, but just as a reminder…” Prowl began, just slightly smug, the rotten bastard.

Keller waved his hand at the mech, silencing the already heavily discussed topic immediately. "No ship, or shuttle, is coming down here. Not yet. The President was clear on that,” he said.

They had talked about this way too many times in the past. While the practicality of bringing down an entire alien space craft, far larger than any ship humanity could build even though it was just a shuttle, was enticing when faced with the possibility of more aliens arriving, Keller could not convince his bosses of the safety of doing so. A ship-turned-base wasn't just something to make life easier for them; it was a sign of permanence that Washington was just not ready for when dealing with their Autobot allies.

"For now, NEST's compounds will have to work,” Keller continued. "If need be, Diego Garcia is almost ready to handle you folk, if NEST decides to split its troops between there and here."

Prowl, probably in an unconscious gesture, smirked. "I'm sure the United Kingdom's officials will be so grateful for that," he said, dryly. His door panels danced on his back, so Keller figured he was amused.

"For a mech that's supposed to be humorless, you sure have sarcasm down," Keller muttered, though he was also thinking about how he would be having to deal even more with their British allies now if they did move some Autobots into the joint military base.

"I did not become the Autobot Chief Tactician without mastering the ability to adapt, Director," Prowl replied calmly. He opened the door to the empty conference room for the human. "Come. Let's call for Prime and see what we can do about our problems."

End *Chapter 9*.

Next, we get to meet the bestest most fun minor character ever in this story, AND some giant robot angst! You know you're excited for this, guys.

A/Ns:
- Diego Garcia, a real military base in the Pacific, is jointly owned by both British and American forces. Hence the random British soldiers in *Revenge of the Fallen* and this story.
- Yup, Obama's the President at this point. Might as well make this easier for myself and keep that in ahaa.
- Pluto will forever be a planet in my heart. RIP Pluto. I'll tell my grandkids about having nine planets back in my day…
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Drama all around today, guys~ I swear, I'm really a Jazz/Prowl fan, but for now, enjoy your unrestrained robot angst. First, let's see the humans fail at surviving in the non-apocalypse. (Thank you again, Shantastic!)

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Ten days after they crashed into this new existence, the NEST soldiers seemed to deem the human survivors as "safe." Not "unimportant," Kass realized; she doubted many of them sincerely understood the depth of their situation or where they had come from, but they seemed to honestly be making the effort to help them. Some of that help was unwanted, but she wasn't going to shut them out like Rachel and Vortex were doing. They needed NEST to help them and it was a miracle they actually were.

That morning, Lieutenant Robert Epps had asked them if they wanted to eat in the mess hall, instead of taking their breakfast in the hangar with the mechs. It seemed silly to have them eat separately from the other humans, since there were proper tables and actual conversations going on in the other room. Wildrider and Bluestreak openly protested against separating the group, with Thundercracker looming ever-so-slightly more in the background than he had been, but Jazz won them over with the logic that it had to happen eventually – and that it would be good for the kids to interact more with other humans. Arcee and he agreed to chaperone again and Kass found herself walking into a real cafeteria with many soldiers milling about, chatting away cheerfully with each other.

It was surreal to walk around the tiled room; Kass found herself looking around cautiously, wincing at loud laughter and the crashing of plates and silver against plastic tables. Epps led them over to the far wall where there was a long row of silver trays, some propped over a small flame.

"Here," Epps said, taking the lid off of one container as an example. He smiled reassuringly at the four. "Eat as much as you want. There's plenty."

"...Thank you," Barns said quietly. Rachel even looked taken back by the sheer amount of food on the table.

For a moment, they stood awkwardly looking at it and then looked at each other. Stiffly, Kass took one of the plastic plates and reached for the first container, which looked like it held eggs. She hadn't seen that much scrambled eggs... well, she couldn't remember ever seeing that much. And there was sausage and ham. And toast. And butter.

"What is it?" Rachel asked, peering at the yellow substance in the bowl.

"Butter," Epps told her, sounding surprised she didn't know.
Rachel stared back at him quizzically. "What's butter?" she asked, confused.

Kass wanted to laugh at the stunned look Epps sent her, but she didn't want to sound hysterical. She piled up Danny's plate, hoping the smells would get her to eat more. She had only nibbled on the foods they had been given earlier.

They sat down with the other humans at the mess hall tables. Arcee rolled over to stand with them, more curious than defensive of the soldiers around them as they started to eat. It was delicious, hot and entirely unlike anything they had ever had before. Kass was reminded of the meals her mother had scrounged together when they had been able to share resources with the other cave dwellers. They had had a cow once, a weak thing that died after only two years, but Kass knew what butter and milk tasted like from that experience. Rachel was thoroughly entranced by the dairy products, though Barns apparently knew he was lactose intolerant, so he stuck to coffee.

Danny even ate. In fact, she ate everything off of her plate, as did the other humans. Kass refrained from going back for seconds, fearing it was rude, even though her stomach traitorously thundered for more. She didn't know why it did, since she was certain she was full.

Epps saw her looking at the trays, however, and encouraged her to go back for more. She did and she brought back more for Danny. They all had seconds, though that soon proved to be a mistake.

"Good breakfast, huh?" Jazz asked, looking pleased as they sat back from the table.

Three out of the four humans abruptly turned green in the faces and hurled said-breakfast up. Only Rachel made it to a trash bin. Kass, having not thrown up, didn't have the strength to calm the ensuing madness as Arcee and Jazz freaked out at the NEST soldiers, because she sure as hell felt like throwing up.

It didn't take Barns long to figure out what was wrong. After assuring Wildrider and Bluestreak both—repeatedly—it wasn't poisoning when they got back to their hangar, he turned to a strained Epps and told him, "We are not used to processed food."

And it was more than that, too, Kass realized a little later. The state of the food was harmless, but their bodies, half-malnourished and accustomed to scavenged food that was potentially out of date, was not used to the fresher chemicals the foods had from preservatives and the like. It wasn't like they were going to get anything else, however, so they would have to acclimate to the substances on their own.

The second reason for their bodies rejecting the food so violently came from a very basic fact, one that made Kass feel almost shamed in front of the soldiers and curious Autobots… they were just not used to having that much on their plates.

"Why'd ya eat so much then?" Jazz asked, bewildered. He had been busy for the entirety of their stay there talking to people in charge, but whenever he could, he'd sit there with them as a reassuring presence. Kass knew those moments helped to keep things sane for the rest of them.

Rachel, red faced, became irritable when embarrassed. "Why the fuck do you think?" she challenged.

"Enlighten us," drawled the chief NEST officer, Lennox, who gave her a cold look. They still didn't get along well at all.

Barns scowled back at him. "You are not comprehending our situation," he replied shortly. He gestured at himself and the other three women. "We are from a world without comforts like this,
comprenez? We are not used to having so much food present."

"I don't get it," the blue Autobot, Jolt, stated, optics focused on them, confused.

Kass sighed and tried to focus on straightening her cot. "If you were not given the opportunity to eat for days on end at times," she began quietly, "would you not also try to eat as much food as you could the moment you were given access to it?"

Basic. Simple. Oddly embarrassing. The mechs stared at them with incomprehension, well, the ones that weren't in their group. Lennox stopped glaring and thankfully looked cowed.

"Oh," he said. He hesitated and nodded apologetically. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking that way."

"What part of, 'we came from Hell on Earth' do you morons not get?" Vortex snarled. He focused his glare on Optimus, unafraid. "You gave us more energon in one sitting than I have seen in almost three months' time. You gave the humans more fresh food than they've seen in years."

Optimus stared back with a guarded expression, but Kass saw a flash of recognition in his optics. He nodded and told Lennox to get the human survivors proper medical attention, including for their diet.

No, Kass thought airily, they would not be simpler to handle than the mechs would be.

That said, the mechs didn't make it easy to focus on human problems. As the days went on, and it became clearer that they'd all be stuck at the NEST base for an unknown period of time, Wildrider became antsier. He demanded more time outdoors and he seemed to cause the NEST soldiers to be more on edge than any of the other mechs did. Jazz pleaded their case, but it only earned them half-hour increments out in front of the hangar and those moments were never long enough for any of them. Kass wanted to lay in the sun—oh, the sun—forever if she could. She had never expected to see it shine so brightly.

Unfortunately, the Autobots on the base were less sympathetic than even the NEST soldiers were when it came to concerns like that. Ironhide was her least favorite guard, because he was just looking for a fight most times.

"Watch it, Decepticon!" the truck snapped when Wildrider strayed farther from the hangar doors than they were allowed. Wildrider whipped around and gave Ironhide a fierce look that the Autobot just sent back with equal hate. "That's right, glare all you want. Just give me a fragging excuse, please—"

Without prompt, a small voice interrupted the brewing fight. "Leave him alone," Danny said. Her voice was just as weak as any other human's compared to the mechs, but the moment she spoke, everyone stopped and looked at her in shock.

Barns gawked at her. "Danny?" he asked, stunned.

Danny ignored him, glaring up at Ironhide weakly. "Leave him alone. You're a bully. You're all bullies," she said sharply. Her voice was hoarse from misuse and she turned around to Wildrider with an almost blank face. "Wildrider, come on. Let's go."

Wildrider, looking immediately at Barns and Kass with panicked optics, strode after her as she walked back to their part of the hangar. "Danny, you are speaking now?" he asked, concern, panic and desperation bleeding into his voice. "Danny?"

Kass hated the fact that nothing they did helped their smaller friend. Jazz was always talking with the Autobots, and Arcee and Thundercracker went with him a lot, which left them with the less
emotionally stable mechs, the ones who didn't know how to deal with the silence any more than the humans did. Bluestreak, bless him, was too upset to really be able to give them some sort of solid sense of comfort. Kass spent most of her time keeping her human friends sane, but she was also constantly keeping an eye on the mechs, who were just as distraught.

She did not like how irritable Thundercracker was still. She knew he had seen Prowl—they all had—but she had hoped he would be able to ignore it. It would probably blow over the longer they stayed here, but she prayed it wouldn't amount to a fight.

When they finally got their physical concerns under control, including checking for cancer relating illnesses ("What do you mean, squishies get sick from nuclear waste?!") "What the hell did you think happened, 'Rider?") and anything else they might have picked up in their strange world, Kass realized they had other concerns to focus on now.

"We've got on-site psychologists now," Lennox said, speaking only to the four one evening. They had been stuck on the base for over a week and a half now, but Lennox was far nicer than he had been earlier. "I don't know if you've ever had to deal with one—I doubt it—but I think it would help a lot."

"I agree," Kass said, nodding. Rachel looked less than pleased, but Barns nodded in agreement as well. Danny said nothing.

They would meet with the psychologists soon, possibly in a few days. Kass was more interested in the chance to explain their origins to someone than in actually dealing with her "problems". She doubted the majority of their hosts really understood where they had come from. The sooner they all understood one another, the sooner they could all get along. Whether or not that entailed leaving or being free to leave… she knew they had to take baby-steps with this one.

That didn't make it easy to lay there at night, with Jazz and Thundercracker and Arcee arguing Lord-knew-what while the rest of them lay there, as gloomy as if they were waiting for a death sentence. Their current state of limbo was unnerving and it made it difficult to sleep. Even when they could, they received no rest.

Barns was having nightmares, Kass couldn't sleep at all, Danny was still mostly catatonic, and Rachel couldn't keep still. She paced like a wild animal trapped in an invisible cage; the open hangar mocked them all with doors open to sunshine and fresh air. The mechs silently screamed for freedom and Kass wasn't sure how long they could actually hold on before someone—her, another human, or a mech—snapped.

One night, suffering from her prolonged insomnia, Kass went into the lavatory and found Rachel standing there, half-naked from the waist up in front of one of the shower mirrors. Kass stared in shock and Rachel made no move to show she knew Kass was there.

"What are you doing?" Kass asked, stunned. She moved closer cautiously.

Rachel was standing there, just looking at herself in the mirror. She was examining what had to be the largest scar on her body, curving up from her lower rib to her right shoulder blade. A lasting reminder from the drones; Kass thought it was from long ago, before Rachel had even met Jazz and Thundercracker. The empty look in Rachel's eyes made the silence around them drag on eerily.

"Rachel?" Kass called again, disturbed. She stepped up behind her and tried to look closer at Rachel's face.

Eyes just as tired, red and tight-lined as Kass' and everyone else's, Rachel slowly turned and looked
at her friend.

"I..." she started. Finally, a spark of recognition returned to her blue eyes and she pulled away. "Never mind."

She hastily pulled on her shirt, covering two decades worth of scars and newer fading scratches. Kass looked at her silently, knowing that only two weeks ago, they had all been dirty and horrid looking.

Rachel, hair washed and shining for the first time since Kass had known her, looked at her reflection with a mixture of awe and grief.

For the first time in their lives, they were clean from head to toe.

But they couldn't wash away the scars. The pain, fear and loss were burned into their hearts and minds. The dirt, though physically gone, was burned into their flesh.

"I look so old," Rachel whispered, eyes wide.

Kass reached out and steadied her shoulder. "...Come on, Rachel," she said gently. "Let's go."

They went back to the cots and Kass was left staring up at the ceiling above them. To think, she would have given anything for a solid home and protective roof over their heads.

Now, the tile blocked out the stars.

She wasn't sure how much longer they could last.

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"Hey, you've reached my voicemail. Um, this is Sam by the way, which I guess you already knew if you're calling me. If this is mom, I swear, my battery died. Um, leave a message and I'll be back—I'll call you back later. Bye."

Sitting on his back steps, Miles Lancaster glared at his cell phone and shut it before the tone buzzed and he'd be forced to leave his fourth message for Sam to hear, if he bothered to listen to it when he got back from his weeklong vacation. Mrs. Witwicky swore her son would be back by the end of the week, but Miles had heard that plenty of times in the past. The actual truth was, Sam Witwicky was no longer the same awkward boy Miles had befriended eons ago in daycare.

He was definitely not going back to the Witwicky residence to wait around for an answer either, because the last time Mrs. Witwicky answered the door, she made him wait around in the kitchen and force-fed him oatmeal cookies. He hated oatmeal. What he hated more was waiting around when it was obvious Sam wasn't there. He didn't know what his best friend could have possibly have been doing to warrant his mom to cover for him, but Miles was so exasperated at that point, he needed to confront Sam directly.

Miles blamed Mikaela Banes for the change he'd seen in Sam over the last year and a half, as the disappearing acts were not the only cause for concern. At first, seeing his best friend with the hottest girl in school was shocking and exhilarating—for him and for all of the inconsequential people at school. Sam had achieved a level of awesome that didn't normally grace those at the bottom of the social food chain and Miles was proud of his friend's accomplishment.

However, after several months of Mikaela and Sam still dating, Miles realized it wasn't just a fling or a lucky move on Sam's part. Just as Sam seemed to be in love with the dark haired beauty by their
third date, Mikaela genuinely seemed to be attached to Sam. Not that that was odd, Miles himself thought Sam was fun to hang out with and a great friend. But he'd never expected Mikaela, the evil jock concubine, to recognize Sam's many qualities. By the middle of their senior year he'd had to admit that she might actually have a soul.

It was when Sam started talking about post-college life, about how he and Mikaela were going to get a little house out in the Californian wilderness and work together at the same company—that's when Miles got concerned.

"It's worse than him plotting out a 401k or a retirement home!" he said to Mason one night, again abandoned by Sam for a night with his girl. "He's one step away from picking out baby names and what color they'll paint the nursery!"

It was a serious bro-code infraction to be thinking about those kinds of matters when Miles was repeatedly put on the backburner in exchange for slipping away for weekend after weekend with his girlfriend in that stupid shiny car of Sam's. It didn't make sense about that either; after a year of basking in the coolness of getting that awesome replacement car from the government from that terrorist attack he was in, Sam goes and gives it to his cousin with minimum visitation rights? Miles bet that was Mikaela's fault, too. Why Mr. and Mrs. Witwicky weren't throwing a fit about their son going away every weekend with a girl was beyond him.

Maybe Mikaela had mind-control powers. Or was an alien. Miles considered both options as plausible and not mutually exclusive.

Sighing, Miles shoved his cell phone back into his pocket and ignored the worried look Mason sent his way from the porch steps. He would have to call again later, even though he had a sinking feel it wouldn't make a difference.

He just wanted his friend back. It wasn't fair.

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Security on the base had never been an issue, before. Prowl had overseen most of the initial Autobot security measures himself, teaming up with Lieutenant Epps to balance the responsibilities of NEST soldiers and Autobots to create the most secure net they could around the base. The only problem was that the base's security, at least the part focused on keeping it anonymous and keeping civilians from seeing the Autobots moving around, rested solely on the number and discretion of the mechs present on the base. The more they had walking around, the more risk there was for an accidental sighting.

When he, Jolt and Sideswipe arrived as Galaxus' forward crew almost a year ago, they had had to adjust the net due to satellite threats as well as campers in the park. NEST had actually had to seize control of the majority of the national park as a precaution; they couldn't use the forest authorities because they needed to keep the number of humans involved to a minimum. It was bad enough they had the amount of soldiers on-site that they did.

They had been preparing for an influx of Autobots to arrive within the month—now within the next week—but as their luck would have it, they had grossly underestimated the number of mechs they'd actually be shielding on the base. With the arrival of the alternative future mechs, they would have thirteen mechs on the compound, which was a dangerously large number for the size of the base. They would have to split the number of Autobots and neutral mechs between the future NEST bases proportionally, at some point in the future, to make it work.

Splitting the six time-traveling mechs would be… interesting, if it ever came to having to make that
decision. While they ultimately had no choice, being essentially in the custody of the NEST forces, Prowl did not want to see them intentionally separated; he had no wish to deliberately distress or cause emotional torment to any of them, necessary or not.

It was fascinating to watch the group from a distance, which Prowl often did, considering he felt uneasy going anywhere near them, even the humans. Despite being a team of ten (formerly eleven) humans, Autobots and Decepticons, they functioned as a single unit of Neutral affiliation. They defended each other, slept abnormally close for mechs, and species lines were almost blurred when it came to affections given. One of the mechs was clearly glitched, but everyone defended him as strongly as they did any other. They refused to leave any of their unit behind, willing to fight to stay together to the bitter end.

The Decepticon-Autobot lines were gone for nearly all of them. Arcee seemed to be the only one who still identified herself or any others by factional terms. Thundercracker and Jazz had taken up the mantle of leadership, despite being from different factions, and the others followed them as leaders without a hitch. Even Arcee acknowledged Thundercracker as a recognizable source of authority in a debate. They were very democratic about things, however; only when it came to dealing with NEST was there a clear sign of a hierarchical role at play.

The humans looked to the mechs not as aliens, but as companions. They called it a family, which was odd from Prowl's research, considering that human familial groups rarely included other species. The mechs sometimes called their unit that as well. Obviously, the Transformers had gone native from their time stranded on Earth. That could explain the devotion they had to keep their group together; a world of constant threats against their lives had conditioned them all to believe unity meant survival. They had yet to see that in this world and in NEST's care, they did not need that sort of protective circle to survive.

When the time came, Prowl anticipated the group would have acclimated appropriately and there wouldn't be a hassle to direct each mech and human to a better place for them to live in. The human officials were focused on handling the case of the four humans, who had no identification and no real proof of existence. The mechs had their own troubles, with NEST wondering just what they could even do with the Neutrals. Only Arcee was considering rejoining the Autobots if they cleared her to do so.

They couldn't let Neutrals wander the Earth unmonitored, Prowl realized. He hoped they would have a better solution than just incarcerating them, however. While some of them, like Wildrider, seemed incredibly unstable, most were sane and competent. He especially wanted to see Bluestreak free to do as he pleased, considering their connection. He knew his world's Bluestreak was still on the Galaxus, but the mechs were almost identical; it was difficult for Prowl not to want to offer a means of protection to the younger Praxian.

More than that, and more than Bluestreak, Prowl wanted to see that Jazz was treated properly. His bias was unfair on both accounts, but after two years of mourning, somehow he could not find it in his programming to override that feeling.

It made things difficult, however, to work as he should have. He should never have let Jazz walk in on him like he did at the telecommunications center, the two of them alone. He wondered briefly when Jazz's signal appeared on his HUD how Jazz managed to slip away from NEST eyes to get there, but then he remembered who he was dealing with. The Chief of Special Ops was not a title anyone reached without having the skills, after all.

It was clear Jazz was not there to use the communication consoles or to access the computers, because he stopped short of the door and remained standing there while Prowl pretended not to
notice him, keeping his optics unseeing on the screen and his back to the door. They each silently stood there for a few minutes—until Prowl couldn't bear it any longer.

"Hello, Jazz," he said, turning slightly.

Jazz, his armor undergoing self-repairs now that they were receiving proper energon, grinned. The gesture was sickly compared to the smiles Prowl was used to seeing from his once-dead lover.

"You guys are expectin' more mechs, I hear?" Jazz asked, leaning against the doorjamb calmly. He was tense, ready to flee. He had always been reluctant to talk things through when he was scared.

"Yes." Prowl turned around completely, answering because he knew it wasn't going to be a secret for long. He inclined his head. "I'm unsure of the majority of the crew, but I do know Sunstreaker is scheduled to arrive. They were cut off before the rest of the names were transmitted."

Jazz chuckled. "Oh, good ol' Sunny," he said, before his expression turned thoughtful "Weird. He never showed up on roster in my time, though Starscream never attacked any forward crew neither." He hesitated before adding, "Seems everythin' is different around here."

Prowl felt his doorwings go up and then slowly downward. "Yes," he agreed. "Everything."

They stood there, staring at each other. The silence was awkward and Prowl felt the urge to say something, but nothing came to mind. He had always left the social interactions to Jazz, who was better at them than he was. Now, the silver mech looked as out of his element as Prowl.

Jazz shifted on his pedes, uneasy. "...I guess we should talk, huh?" he asked, the question rhetorical from Prowl's estimation.

"Are you ready for it?" Prowl asked, frowning. Images of their first formal encounter were still seared into his processors. "You were not before."

"Yeah, well, I've slept on it fer a few days," Jazz replied with a shake of the helm. "I'm good now."

What "good" meant in relation to his previous reactions wasn't clear. Prowl looked downwards, feeling a great deal uneasy himself.

"I am not expecting you to take on any feelings toward myself, considering the fact that I am most definitely not the Prowl you knew, nor are you the Jazz I was partnered with in this world," he began carefully, knowing Jazz was paying attention to every word, "but I do have to ask... what was I to you?"

He had expected a slow reply. He looked up and saw Jazz smile. The gesture was sad.

"Th' whole fraggin' world," Jazz answered almost immediately. His smile grew sadder as he spoke. "You were everythin' t' me, even when our army was fallin' t' pieces an' th' universe itself turned on us."

Prowl felt a tremor go through his frame and hid his grimace. "So the same," he stated.

"Yeah," Jazz agreed. He laughed, the sound rough and human. "I guess."

There were so many unanswered questions. His spark ached. "Then what is so wrong with my presence now, Jazz?" Prowl asked, daring to continue the conversation. His doorwings drooped lowly with his mood. "You act like I am Megatron, or worse."
"No," Jazz replied firmly. He narrowed his visor as he took Prowl in visually, confirming something for himself. "Yer Prowl. Yer… definitely Prowl." He stopped and looked down, awkward. "An' that's th' problem."

For a full minute, Prowl waited for a reply to that. He was impatient to know exactly why that was a problem at all, but he saw an answer struggling to break free from Jazz, who looked increasingly ill. The saboteur looked away and, after what seemed like forever, looked back at Prowl. He didn't look him in the optics, however.

"I met someone else," he said bluntly, shattering the silence.

Prowl stared at him.

"…Did you?" he asked, processors running hotter.

Jazz shifted again. "Yeah," he said. He nodded, still not looking at Prowl directly. "TC."

Prowl's stare increased intensity as his spark grew colder. "…The Seeker?" he managed to say. That wasn't… it wasn't…

"Yeah," Jazz replied. He nodded again and this time met Prowl's gaze. "TC." He didn't flinch that time when he said it.

Prowl nodded stiffly. "I… see."

"I love him," Jazz said, sadness marring his features more than the lingering scars did. "I love him… as much as I loved you."

They had loved each other fiercely. They had done everything short of bonding, because they had been officers and the risks had been too great in a wartime environment. Prowl felt part of his spark die anyway, as if it had been ripped away from a bond shattered.

"You mean your Prowl," he said quietly. Context and focus was needed. His processors would glitch out if he wasn't careful.

Jazz ran a clawed hand over his faceplates, again human-like. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah."

Everything about this was so wrong. Prowl shuttered his optics and thought about leaving. He didn't have the strength to move away now, though. He was trapped there, standing in front of a lover he had never had.

"…I buried you," he said, stumbling over the words in a way the stoic tactician never did with anything else in his life or duties.

"Yeah," Jazz replied. He flexed his hands and looked at the floor again. "I never knew if ya had died, but…" he began. "It was pretty much assumed everyone except th' ones we found were gone. Galvatron an' th' drones ensured it."

Prowl watched as Jazz's faceplates melted from a forced calm into a barely restrained grief as the other mech slowly looked up. His visor pinned Prowl where he stood, the green color alien and unwanted.

"I buried you too, Prowler," Jazz said, his gaze haunting and so familiar it burned. "A long time ago."
There was nothing in his processors, battle computer, or any other resource that he had access to that could have given Prowl a suitable response to that. It was done. It was over. And there was nothing he could do.

"I'm sorry, Prowl," Jazz said, remorseful and pained.

Prowl forced himself to look away. "As am I," he said quietly. He walked out of the room and out into hallway.

He left Jazz there and aimed to return to the hangar the Autobots rested in.

He made it as far as the end of the hallway before he was forced to crouch, unable to stop the mechanical wail that ripped from chest, leaving him gripping at his helm in unrestrained grief.

As am I.

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End Chapter 10.

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Hey, you guys want some explanations now? I do, too! Stay tuned for some in the next chapter.

A/Ns:
- Heck yeah, Miles Lancaster is in this story! Spoiler: Bluestreak won't like him. :D
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

BE PREPARED FOR SCIENCE! :D I love it so, but I know it will be confusing. Hopefully Barns will be able to explain it for us. But first, here's some psychology. Many thanks to my psychologist-in-training friend Kelly for the advice here, and Shantastic's editing help, too!

Also: I have a new poll up! :) You should check it out.

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

"Where were you born?"

Rachel blew a stray blonde hair out of her face, lounging casually in the chair the doctor had seated her in. It was probably the comfiest damned chair she had ever sat in; she figured it was the only reason she was still seated there.

"I have no idea," she answered bluntly. "I think Portugal."

The doctor wrote something down on his yellow pad of paper. "Yet you listed your nationality as American?" he prompted.

"Yeah. Mom came from New York with her parents, like my Dad's family." Rachel shrugged, disinterested. "They all ran when the fighting first happened."

"Why did they flee to Portugal?" the doctor asked.

"It was closest," she replied, thinking back to when she had still been able to speak with her mother. That had been over a decade ago, for sure. "They all ran when the fighting first happened."

"The Decepticons?" the doctor asked, writing something else down.

Rachel sighed. "No, the U.S. military. They had to stop the Decepticons somehow." She grabbed the rubber band ball off of the desk's edge and the doctor let her. "Shot themselves in the foot, though. It got some of the 'Cons, but took out the East coast, wiped out most of the people living there. Mom's family flew over when they realized it was coming, but my Dad's family crossed over in one of the last evacuation boats at the last minute."

The doctor paused and looked at her over his dark rimmed glasses. "I see..." he began. He glanced back down to his tablet and gestured at another white sheet of paper she had given him earlier. "You listed your next-of-kin as the Autobot Jazz and the Decepticon Thundercracker."
"TC's Neutral. But yeah. They're my adopted guardians," she replied, shrugging again. "I guess they're my dads if you wanted to get specific." Jazz was more like a mom, but she refrained from mentioning that unless she really wanted to tease him.

The doctor gave her an odd look. It was the usual one people gave her whenever she explained. "Both of them?" he stated.

"Yeah." Rachel arched an eyebrow at him, challenging. "Problem?"

"No, no," the doctor replied quickly. He tucked the paper to the side. "Just curious."

"Yeah, well, my real mom was a bitch and she died when I was eight," she said bluntly as she bounced the rubber band ball between her hands. "Next question."

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"And you lived in the cave camp for… eight years?"

Kass nodded, sitting properly in the seat they had told her to sit in. The tiny little office must have been a hand-me down from another officer, but she smiled politely at the doctor, who was surely doing his best with the odd situation.

"Yes," she replied. "With my mum, dad, and younger brother, Kevin."

"And they're deceased?" the doctor asked, broaching the conversation carefully.

Kass only hesitated a little. "…Yes," she said, trying not to be cold sounding. He was just doing his job. "All of them."

"Did they all die at the same time?" the doctor asked quietly, while scratching God-knew-what into his notes. Kass wondered if she was crazy; it was difficult for her to tell just how far round the bend they really were, even when she spent time around other people who supposedly weren't crazy just because they hadn't come from her world.

"The drones hit the camp," Kass replied. She forced herself to retrieve the facts, not relive the memories. "I… I was near the entrance, and fell down the front slope. The drones missed me, but everyone else in the camp was killed."

The doctor gave her a kindly sympathetic look. "How many people do you think died?" he asked gently.

Kass thought about it, trying to remember. "We had two hundred twenty nine campers," she replied after a moment. She didn't remember all of their names. She probably should have.

"How many survived?"

"Just me," Kass said. She gave in and started picking at the hem of her new shirt. "And Bluestreak," she added.

The doctor nodded. "I see…"

The scratching of his pen on the paper almost scratched against her brain as it continued. The clock on the wall ticked away loudly and Kass found herself floundering under the noise. It shouldn't have seemed that loud, even if the room felt narrow and cramped.

"You listed Bluestreak as your next of kin. Why did you do that?" the psychiatrist asked, peering up
at her curiously. She hoped it was because he was wondering how they were related to the mechs, not because he disapproved.

"He is like my brother. I love him as such," she explained. She smiled tightly, blocking harsher memories. "He was very close to my real brother in the camp."

"He reminds you of Kevin?" the doctor, painfully observant.

Kass opened her mouth to speak, but it took her a moment to actually formulate a reply. "…Yes. Yes, he does," she admitted. Why she sounded so quiet when she replied, she didn't know.

The doctor wrote something else down and the clock kept ticking. Kass closed her eyes and when they opened, she saw the doctor looking at her intently from across the desk.

"Would you like to tell me about your mother?" he asked.

Kass sighed.

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"Your name is Danielle, isn't it?"

The morose young woman sitting half-upright on the chair tensed up, but eventually nodded. "…Yeah." Her voice was quiet and far away.

"Your friends were concerned about you not talking to them a lot lately, Danielle," the psychiatrist began, his voice gentle. He leaned forward, smiling. "Do you have a nickname?"

There was a pause. "…Danny," the girl said. She almost whispered it.

"May I call you that?" the doctor asked. When she said nothing, he took it as acceptance. "Well, Danny, they say you've been rather quiet. I know you've just gone through some awful things."

Danny said nothing. The doctor sighed quietly to himself.

"They mentioned that the death of one of your traveling group occurred immediately before you came here," he began, moving in on perhaps the most emotional topic for the woman. "That must have been awful. I'm very sorry for your loss."

Danny just stared at the floor, expression blank. There was a new twinge around her eyes, however.

"I heard that the Autobot Wheeljack was a father figure to you, Danny," the psychiatrist continued, speaking very carefully now. "Do… do you want to talk about him?"

The silence continued and it was apparent that that conversation was off-limits for now.

"What about the Decepticon Wildrider?" the doctor prompted, trying to move the conversation into more comfortable grounds. "Mr. Rancourt, he told the soldiers that you and Wildrider are very close, like family. Do you see him like that?"

The brunette bit her lip, still refusing to look up. "'Rider's my friend," she admitted quietly.

"Why is that, Danny?" the psychiatrist asked, gentle but pressing. "He's a Decepticon."

Danny did look up at that, her eyes sharp. "You people are stupid," she said, blunt.
The doctor frowned. "We want to help, Danny," he said, reassuringly.

That did little to soothe her and with a muttered, "Not all of you." She eventually went back to glaring at the floor. The doctor sighed to himself.

"Let's talk about you for now, okay?" he said, speaking soothingly. "Can you tell me about your biological family?"

Danny's hands slowly gripped the sides of the chair tightly, the skin going taut and white. "I don't want to talk to you now," she said simply, her words cold and guarded.

The psychiatrist stopped. He nodded sadly. "…Okay, Danny. We can speak again tomorrow."

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Being the last to be spoken to was never easy. Barns had waited impatiently in the hangar with the mechs, as his humans friends were escorted to and from their meetings with the psychiatrist that Lennox had procured for them. He had no idea what to expect from his own session; he had never even seen a real doctor before coming to this world, so it was all quite unfamiliar territory. Rachel was blasé about it when she returned, clearly not having been helpful to the poor doctor, and Kass seemed more on edge, though she assured the others she was just tired.

Danny didn't say a word either way; Barns watched her, grief tenfold in his heart.

When he entered the small therapy room, he saw it was just a small office. That was something he could deal with. He sat down and smiled politely at the gray-haired man across the table from him.

The psychiatrist smiled back, pushing papers aside as he greeted Barns. "Hello, Mr. Rancourt. May I call you Barnaby?" he asked, shaking Barns' hand with a firm handshake.

"Of course," Barns said, chuckling. "You could call me Barns, if you'd like. Most do."

"My name is Dr. Doherty," the doctor said, sitting back with a comfortable smile. "I'll be your therapist for the time being. Your friends' therapist as well, if they wish it."

Barns nodded. "Thank you, for that," he said. He shook his head. "I can only imagine what you think of us so far."

Dr. Doherty laughed slightly, glancing at his papers. "I understand that this is a difficult situation for all of you. Would you tell me about yourself, Barns?" the doctor began, settling back even further. He folded his hands on his lap, papers ignored. "Anything you'd like."

There were many things he could have said, but Barns wasn't sure which was best. He decided to just go with facts for now. Harmless.

"I was born in Normandy, France, in the town of Rouen," he began. "It was destroyed shortly after that, so my grandparents fled and took me with them. We traveled always."

"So, you lived with your grandparents?" Doherty prompted.

Barns nodded. "They raised me. My mother and father were killed shortly after I was born, when the drones attacked our home." He folded his hands in his lap, trying to look calm or at least normal. He was feeling a bit uneasy under such intense staring. "My mother was British, so my grandmother taught me English afterwards at her request."
"How did you meet the others?" Doherty asked. This time he did reach for his pen and paper, most likely to fill in the blanks left by his brief interview with NEST.

"Well, when I was ten my grandparents and I met an American soldier named Piers Goddard," Barns confirmed. "He traveled with us, and became a great friend. He took care of me when my grandparents passed away—that was when I was twelve. We traveled alone until we encountered Vortex."

Doherty paused and gave Barns a strange look. "The helicopter Decepticon," he repeated, fishing for some sort of answer.

"Ex-Decepticon, if you would," Barns replied coolly. He was sick of them labeling the mechs inappropriately. "Yes. He saved our lives from humans who wanted to harm us."

At this least NEST official had the decency to nod at the correction, accepting it. "Apologies," he said, sounding honest. "Rachel told me that you met the rest of the group shortly after that?"

"Yes."

"And you all continued to travel and live together from that point on?"

"Yes."

"So, all in all, you would count the ten of you as a solid unit? A family one, perhaps?"

All at once, the calm feeling vanished. Instead, Barns felt vaguely cold.

"Eleven," he said, startling Doherty. Barns looked at him with hard eyes. "Wheeljack was a member of our family. He is… was… important to us, and should not be disregarded so easily."

Doherty hesitated. "I'm sorry. His loss must have been awful."

An understatement. "Considering it only happened two weeks ago, yes," Barns replied. "It is awful."

If they would ever recover from it, Barns wasn't sure. They had lost more than just a teammate; they had each lost part of themselves. The way they functioned, survived—they were all dependent upon each other. They had always known it, but that fact was even clearer to them all now, given the impressively large hole his absence left in their lives.

Doherty was watching him carefully now. "What happened, Barns?" he asked, shaking his head slowly. He put his pen down. "Why are you here?"

Barns smiled thinly. "I wish I could tell you," he replied, honestly. "I have no answers. Wheeljack told us nothing, if he even planned this. And there is no way to prove anything now that it is done."

"You've been having nightmares?" Doherty asked, suddenly.

Kass must have said something. He considered lying. But that would be ridiculous, making it pointless for him to see the doctor at all. If his friends were going through this, he would too, and he was no liar.

"….Yes," he managed to say, averting his gaze. He didn't know why he did; he felt oddly embarrassed by it all.

"Your friends tell me you are always there to support them," Doherty continued, a strange look in his eyes. "You take on a lot of responsibility for a man your age."
Barns forced down the defensive response that he wanted to give. "I am twenty-one, sir. I am an adult," he replied shortly. "I have been since I was twelve. None of us have had the luxury of childhood." He took a deep breath before adding, "I have nightmares because I lived a nightmare for the majority of my existence. Even as a child my grandparents could not protect me from the realities, the dangers of our world."

Doherty's eyes grew softer. "Are you afraid? Even now?" he asked gently.

"Yes." Barns wondered if he would ever not be afraid.

"Why?"

Barns started to speak, but his throat almost didn't work. "W-we cannot stay still. Not in our world," he replied. He could hear the rising tone of his voice, but he tried—tried to keep calm. "We are always moving, always hiding, because the drones are everywhere. They are always there. Following us."

"They're not here now, Barns," Doherty said, shaking his head slowly.

All at once, Barns' mind made an abrupt turn. "I don't know why," he said, desperate to communicate with the one outsider who might understand how he felt.

That made Doherty pause. "What?" he asked, surprised.

"Why are they not here?" Barns asked, feeling panicked. Why? He couldn't figure it out. He couldn't understand. "They should be. Or soon, at least." He ran a hand through his hair sloppily. "Why?"

"Why, what, Barns?" Doherty asked, concerned.

Barns gave him a dark look. "Why is this world so different? What was changed that made everything better?" he asked, knowing the psychiatrist couldn't actually answer him. It felt good to rant, however. His mind flew all over trying to answer it for him. "This is not the Earth my grandparents knew."

Doherty frowned. "This is still Earth. You are a human being. This is your planet, too."

That was a lie. It was such a lie. Barns laughed shakily.

"It is not. I have no home now. None of us do. It has been taken away from us," he said, refusing to agree. "Though perhaps I should be grateful. I am alive, as are… most of my friends." He looked out at the wall, drained. "Everyone tells us we are safer here."

No matter if it drove them mad—this world was better. They had to accept it.

"But…?" Doherty prompted, leaning forward.

Barns finally looked back at him. A single fact harried his thoughts and prompted dozens of questions. It didn't fit. They didn't fit.

It didn't make sense.

"This place… is not like our world," he managed to say.

"Yes, I know," Doherty replied, nodding.

"No… this is not even like our year 2009. In 2009, Earth was already at war, beginning to be
bombarded. This world is untouched." Barns looked out at the air, confused. "...Why is this different?"

And then, all at once, the problem—and its answer—smacked him straight in the face.

Doherty saw his stunned expression and became truly alarmed. "Barns?"

"...Why..." Barns flailed, trying to get some coherency back. He stood up, ignoring how the chair toppled backwards. "Get me Major Lennox, now."

"What's wrong, Barns—?" Doherty asked, shocked, standing up as well.

Barns didn't wait. He spun around and shouted out for the nearest guard. "I need to speak with Prime and the others, now!"

He prayed he was wrong.

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Well, they weren't nuts. That was a plus, though Lennox still had his private doubts. Dr. Doherty had taken the Major to the side after the three girls had been interviewed, before he'd gone off-duty for the evening.

"They're all dealing with a great amount of grief, social and emotional anxiety..." the psychiatrist said, shaking his head with a sympathetic expression. "I'm also rather certain the Cooper girl's paranoia is being fed by fear of abandonment, so don't be surprised if she reacts violently if you try to separate her from the others prematurely. Danielle is also at risk for an outburst, so you have to be careful what you say around her, around them all. All of them are suffering from some form of PTSD, and none of them feel secure in their current environment."

Lennox hadn't been expecting much else, to be honest; he knew all four of the adolescent refugees would have psych problems galore and no one could blame them. He hoped counseling would help, because to be honest, he didn't have the time to be worrying about a full mental meltdown from one of them, with all of his other duties piling up around him. He would have to trust Doherty to direct the four toward some sort of psychological closure... although he'd definitely have to take the lead on getting them out of that hangar. He wasn't looking forward to it.

That said, Lennox was more than willing to drop what he was doing that evening and rush back to Hangar B, where the ten survivors were staying. Optimus had been called as well, judging by how the truck was now rolling in from the other side of the airfield. If it was a serious matter that required both of them, Lennox wanted to deal with it immediately. They had larger concerns pressing down on them and he didn't want these ten interrupting those matters later with problems they could have settled earlier.

However, as Lennox walked up to Epps, who was already waiting there with Ratchet and Ironhide, he noted none of them looked particularly enthused to be standing there.

"What's the matter?" Lennox asked his friend, glancing around uncertainly.

Epps shook his head and pointed at Barns. The brown haired Frenchman was literally pacing in front of Thundercracker and the other humans in their ensemble.

The last people to hurry back were Jazz, Arcee and, unfortunately, Simmons. Most of the survivors glared at the disliked agent, but the star of the show was Barns, who ignored him entirely. Jazz walked up, glancing at Thundercracker in a familiar display of reassurance, but focused on Barns.
"Barns?" Jazz called. He stopped and crouched down to talk to him. "What's wrong, man?"

Waving a hand his way, Barns seemed to be more jittery than the rest of them were, even more than Wildrider. "I-I need to think. Right," Barns said. He ran a hand through his hair. "Right, I need everyone to listen to me, now, for just a moment."

"What's the meaning of this?" Ironhide suddenly growled, ignoring the warning look Optimus sent his way. "You can't just call a meeting with us as if you are a part of this team—"

Next to Bluestreak and Kass, the helicopter ex-Decepticon rumbled lowly. "Watch it, Autobot," he snapped. Lennox groaned; they were all insanely defensive of each other, but it never helped that his group of Autobots had their own biases. They were lucky they hadn't had a real brawl yet.

"Vortex, not now," Barns interrupted, catching their attention again. He continued to pace, but judging by how his voice increased in volume, Lennox knew he was speaking to all of them now, getting to his point. "I was talking with Dr. Doherty and I realized something."

Next to Prime, Simmons sneered. "Oh, boy, talking with a psychologist, great way to start one of these little pow-wows," he drawled.

Barns whirled around and glared at him with open hate. "Shut up, you stupid, awkward little man," he seethed, motioning jerkily at the other man. "Mon dieu, just listen!"

Epps snorted and Lennox wanted to smack him; this wasn't funny. Jazz waved a clawed hand at the irate young man, trying to calm him down.

"A'ight, we're listenin'. Relax, Barns," he said, reassuring.

Taking a deep breath, Barns nodded and managed not to start pacing again. "I was talking with Dr. Doherty and was discussing our situation, as in, why we are here, in an alternate past," he said. He looked only at Jazz when he spoke. "This is not a different time. This is an entirely different world."

Lennox stared at him. "Come again?" he repeated, more than a little confused at this point. He had thought they'd settled the whole space-time jumping thing. They had just screwed up the timeline by coming there. The future was different now because of it. Not that big a deal.

…The oddness of that statement did not escape him either. Lennox sighed. He had been working with aliens for way too long now.

Barns was speaking to his friends now, clearly. "The science is all wrong," he said, practically begging. "It's all wrong and I asked Wheeljack about it, but he said that it used an advanced theory, something I hadn't learned yet."

"The science of the space bridge?" Ratchet suddenly interjected.

Ironhide glowered at the human speaker. "How do you know the science of a space bridge?" he challenged.

The look of disdain Barns sent the Autobot was priceless. "Oh, please, I have read more physics text books than a university student. They weren't that hard to find in libraries," he snapped, irritable. "I was tutored by Wheeljack. I know physics. I know space-time principles and theories." Turning he looked back to Jazz. "I know the theoretical basis we have for time travel itself, and the bridge itself was all wrong, Jazz. It could not have sent us back in time."

"Explain," Lennox said, catching the boy's attention. He stood back and waited; this kid might be a
bit agitated, but he had been coherent in all their previous discussions. Hopefully he did have something to say that would explain things. How time travel could actually not be a part of this crazy mess, Lennox was still trying to figure out.

"We are in another time, yes, because the dates line up and the facts, while different, are still relatable," Barns replied, hurried. "There is still a war, there are still Autobots and Decepticons, and the only thing wrong is that the wrong people are dead while others still live."

"Why won't a time machine work for that, though?" Epps asked, bewildered. Lennox wondered briefly why the Autobots were just looking at Barns instead of saying anything helpful, but maybe they were just as curious as the humans.

Barns shook his head. "We cannot have used a time machine. It is impossible." "Why?" Lennox asked, frustrated. Not that time travel was better than any other excuse, he rationalized, but how else could he explain what had happened?

"It is impossible that we are in the past!" Barns exclaimed. "Because there is no corresponding time machine here!"

There was a pause. Lennox looked up and saw the mechs peering at Barns with increased intensity, but they didn't say anything helpful. Lennox wasn't exactly sure what that meant.

"Not following," Epps stated, face blank. Pacing again, Barns waved his hand dismissively. "When we found it, the bridge had been dismantled—not merely shut down out of disrepair, but actually taken apart physically. I am very familiar with the way that Wheeljack reconstructed the bridge that we used, but I have no way of knowing if it had been configured to send us to another time without a corresponding receiver device. Regardless, as I understand it, we could not have gone back further than when that particular machine was made, no matter how much power it had, because it could not have existed prior to the moment it was made. The machine we used couldn't have been more than a few decades old, placing us back in the Alps, mind you, in the '20s to '30s range." The Frenchman paused and looked back up at the Autobots and then at Lennox. "We are not in the Alps and we are not in 2020. We are in America in the year 2009." He frowned, grim. "Obviously, this is not correct."

"Well… shit," Jazz said, stunned. Thundercracker leaned closer, optics wide. "What did Wheeljack design it to do then?" he asked. No one seemed to have an answer.

"I have no idea," Barns said, shaking his head grimly. "What I do know is that we cannot physically be in our 2009, because according to our history, the world was very much different from this one by this point in time anyway."

Simmons, who had been sulking wordlessly, frowned. "So… what?" he asked.

"We are not in the past. Well, not our past. It is not even possible that we are just in a timeline that we screwed up." Barns looked around helplessly. "We are in another sleeve of space-time all together. Another 2009."

Ratchet moved forward, creaking slightly. "A parallel dimension?" he suggested, intrigued.

"A whaaaat?" Rachel blurted, stunned.
"It must be!" Barns continued, his enthusiasm tinged with mild hysteria at this point. "Time travel is complicated in the theory anyway, at least for human science. However, it is clear that no matter the scientific basis for the theory, the Grandfather clause prohibits either man or mech from interfering with his own past, because changing the stream of time in such a drastic way creates a paradox. The paradoxical loop of you not existing after killing your grandfather before he meets your grandmother is avoided, however, if instead of the past, you create an alternative timeline just with your presence alone, affecting things differently."

Jazz opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came forth. The others in the room glanced around, waiting for a further explanation. Barns just grinned, the expression sickly.

"We are the grandson who went back in time to kill our grandfather. However, instead of killing him and negating our own existence, we have solidified our presence in the past as a separate, independent entity in a new loop of time," he said. "We have made a new, parallel dimension."

Rachel stared at him before shaking her head with a wide-eyed look. "Holy crap, I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about," she began, that sentiment reflected on the majority of the humans' faces. Lennox felt the first echo of sympathy for Rachel as a migraine began to bloom in his own head.

"That doesn't explain everythin' though!" Jazz exclaimed, ignoring the humans. "I mean, frag, look at this place! In 2009, in my 2009, it was totally different. How did we affect anythin' before we arrived, though?"

Barns grabbed his head, pained. "I don't know," he said, moving away from them slowly. "Merde… I have no idea."

"Wait, I am so confused," Kass began, eyes pinched in almost pain as she tried to follow all of the details.

"We arrived here, now, in 2009. What Jazz is talking about is the fact that things were changed by 2007, long before we arrived," Thundercracker began slowly, surprising them. Lennox watched as the jet spoke, mainly to the humans. "This world was already changed before we came here," he said. "We didn't make this new world. We just… arrived here and it was already changed."

Epps looked over at Lennox, both helpless to understand. "How the hell did…"

Stopping in halfway between Thundercracker and Lennox, Barns froze and looked up, catching Lennox's eye.

"…Unless it wasn't us," Barns began suddenly.

That made Optimus speak up for once, tilting his head. "What?" he asked.

Turning around slowly, Barns looked straight at his friends, ignoring the NEST officials entirely. "Two of the original machine creators were missing from the cave," he said, so bluntly and coldly, it was shocking.

Lennox had no idea what the kid was talking about. He hoped it was nonsense, but judging by how Jazz's face dropped into shock and how all of the survivor team looked at Barns in horrified realization… it had to be important. How important, Lennox didn't know.

"…You're not thinking…" Kass began, looking startled.

"I am," Barns said, his voice rising with definite hysteria. "Someone traveled here, to this timeline, in
the space bridge before us. *Decades* before." He took several breaths, none of it helping. "And if my hunch is correct… they are the ones who changed this world into what it is now, a different 2009. Somehow Wheeljack configured the space bridge to send us to this location in this particular timeline… making it a trip to a different world, not simply a different time."

Lennox was not a physicist and he wasn't one of Simmons' Sector-7 agents who knew the science behind a lot of what the Autobots did. Perhaps that's why it felt worse standing there, with that open ended statement hanging over their heads.

If it wasn't time travel… and this had to do with more mechs running around, literally out there in the wide open, effecting changes to reality that weren't supposed to be happening…

Somehow, Lennox thought absently, he knew things couldn't possibly get worse than *that*.

Jazz looked at Barns and then back up at Thundercracker with his visor widened to a comical width. "…Well, fuck," he said bluntly.

Lennox could understand—*almost*—what Barns was trying to say. Almost. If this group had actually gone through time and landed before the majority of the Cybertronians were even close to Earth (and the humans weren't even born yet), Lennox would have thought that there would be a major distortion in the timeline that they themselves would have noticed. But by going through time, according to this Grandfather paradox, they just *landed* there, and their presence alone did nothing but create a new timeline over all. The future wasn't changed, simply because it wasn't the same past this group had lived through before. It was a completely new future.

But that wasn't it, either, was it? *They* weren't the time travelers; they had simply landed in a new existence.

But if they had landed in a new existence, that meant the new existence had been caused by another force. *Another* group of time travelers, one that had apparently landed long before Mission City. Lennox suddenly felt ill as he realized that they had missed something crucial—something mind-blowingly crucial.

*Where were the original time travelers?*

Lennox opened his mouth to demand an answer, but everything was interrupted when an aide from the telecommunications room burst into the hangar bay, out of breath and panicked.

"Lennox! Prime!" the aide called, earning everyone's startled attention. "We just got radio confirmation—the *Hyperion* forward team is entering Earth's atmosphere! ETA is three hours. Their landing site is in the Mojave desert!"

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End Chapter Eleven.

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*A/Ns:*
-For more info on what the hell Barns was talking about, check out "Time Travel Paradoxes" on the webpage howstuffworks. Google it for the website!

-Yes, those two missing scientists. Remember, there were eight. They had six bodies. The last two were missing. However, I promise, there are many plot twists left in this story. Be ready for anything. Even for Barns to be wrong! ;)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Mojave Desert
Eastern California

They found the crash site not far from I-40. Their liaisons at NASA tracked the descent of the four Autobot protoforms until they finally made contact with the desert floor. Forward teams, Lennox had been told by Ironhide last year while waiting for Prowl's team to arrive, did not arrive by shuttle. They donned protective shells geared to protect and conceal them during travel across relatively short distances in space. That was how Optimus brought the original five mechs down from the moon after they had stashed their shuttle, the Ark, which they had used for their interstellar transport.

While it was all fascinating in concept, the miniscule scientist in Lennox was shoved aside when he had to actually deal with retrieving said-mechs, who landed essentially naked, alone, and in need of an alt mode. That was his team's job foremost, aside from getting the Autobot newcomers undercover as soon to close to the highway, and it was dangerous as well. They would have to make this quick.

Lennox found himself staring up at four unfamiliar Cybertronians far sooner than he had expected. Jolt had taken point, arranging this meeting with the new mechs to speed things up, though the four weren't too happy about standing around in their protoforms; it was their weakest state, and remaining in it for very long, especially in unprotected situations, was uncomfortable. They looked far less human this way, as well. When they chose their alt modes, some of them would take on human facial features, like the others had done. Right now they just looked like giant alien robots.

"Greetings," the middle sized mech said as the two groups met. His voice was mechanical and flat, as all mech voices were before they picked a human dialect and inflection to use. Lennox smiled wanly at him, reminded of when they had encountered the Galaxus' forward crew almost a year ago.

"Welcome to Earth. My name is Major William Lennox. I am the squad leader for NEST operations on United States territory," he said, running through the speech as quickly as he could. He looked at the blue Autobot he had driven over with. "Jolt?"

Jolt nodded and moved closer to the four mechs. "State your designation, rank, and operations," the blue Autobot said.

From each of the four Autobots came a string of harsh, ear-grating sounds that was the furthest thing from human language he could even think of. It wasn't composed only of mechanical sounds, and there was a definite word-based phrasing thing going on there, but it contained so many guttural
inflections, odd harmonics and inhuman metal-on-metal sounds that the only thought in his head when he heard it was *Alien*. Ratchet explained once that *all* of the sounds were necessary to convey meaning, inflection and emotion, hence no human would ever be able to speak it properly without mechanical aid.

Chinese and Arabic were officially not the most complicated languages known to man any more, Lennox thought airily.

"I'm so glad I don't need to learn that language," he muttered, shaking his head as they stopped chattering out whatever they had to say. Probably their official designations and some sort of code to prove they were who they said they were.

Jolt turned around and gave him a thumbs-up. "They're cleared, Major," he said.

Granted that they hadn't attacked the NEST convey, Lennox wasn't too surprised they had gotten the right mechs. "Alright, Roberts, get a hold of HQ and let them know our friends arrived safely, and we'll be back once we get them alt modes." He shifted his focus back to the new mechs. "We need to get back to NEST," he said, "The Director of U.S. National Intelligence is flying in from Quantico to meet you, so let's not keep him waiting."

The Autobot closest to Jolt suddenly spoke up, surprising them. "We need human names," he said with, of all things, a Southern accent. "What should I choose?"

"Sniffer?" the taller mech next to him asked. He had a New Jersey accent. Apparently, they had already raided the Internet in the short amount of time since their landing.

The Southern one tilted his head at the suggestion. "No, that's just silly."

The middle one, who had spent most of the time glaring at whoever was speaking, tsked. "My designation is Sunstreaker," he announced, no accent at all. He didn't sound happy. "Prowl already picked that one, because my brother is a moron."

"Oh, you're Sunny, then," Lennox said, without thinking. He smiled at the defensive mech. "Sideswipe told us about you."

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. "Sunny? !" Sunstreaker repeated, angered. "That isn't my designation!"

"It fits you, Sunshine," Jolt teased. Sunstreaker growled and Lennox sighed; it looked like Ratchet and Prowl's prophetic warnings of the incoming twin weren't off the mark. Another loose cannon to monitor, he thought darkly.

"Hoist!" the New Jersey Autobot suddenly exclaimed. He looked around proudly. "I like it."

The Southern one suddenly whined. "I can't decide," he said.

"Neither can I," the tallest one said, speaking for the first time. He had a very proper sounding voice, all formal. He peered down at the humans and asked politely, "What would you suggest, Major?"

Lennox blinked. "Uh, I have no idea." The mech continued to stare at him, so Lennox finally said, "If you guys pick names based on traits, I'd call you Big Guy."

"We already call Prime that though," Lieutenant Kane muttered in amusement from the truck.

The short one suddenly pouted. "I can't think of an adequate designation," he complained.
Lennox shook his head. "Come on, guys, just think of some. We gotta radio it in." He hated paper work, but if it kept Simmons and Keller happy…

"Hound might work for you," Hoist told the smaller mech as Lennox stood there impatiently. Why was it taking so long to contact the team at NEST?

"Hound?" the short one repeated. "Isn't that a name referring to a subservient species? *Canis lupus familiaris*?" Hearing that said with a Southern accent was hilarious.

"It suits you though," Hoist said insistently. "Hound. It's very Red Neck."

Hound, as he was aptly named, tilted his head again. "Very what?"

"And what about me?" the tall one asked again, chuckling. He seemed the calmest, though Lennox wasn't sure if he was the leader of the group or not. Compared to Prowl's unit, these four weren't very military-like. Well, Sunstreaker was.

"Well, how about—," Jolt started to say.

Without warning, the man from the communications truck screamed out, "MAJOR!"

Whirling around, Lennox saw Kane stumble out of the tented vehicle and rush towards him. "What? !" he demanded. Decepticons or something else—?

"That was the Command Team!" the soldier exclaimed. "Ironhide just opened fire on two of the neutrals!"

Behind him, Hound repeated, "Neutrals?" in confusion. Lennox didn't care about explaining that to anybody, as he was personally trying not to lose his shit.

"DAMN IT!" he swore. He barked out orders, knowing every second counted in order to get back to NEST and restore order. He had no idea what had happened, but he didn't trust their miserable run of luck as of late. "Everyone double time back to the base!"

"We do not have alt forms yet—!" the tall one began, alarmed.

Lennox shook his head, knowing it was hopeless. "Lieutenant Kane, get them to the impound now! Pick their alt modes and meet us back in Plumas ASAP!" he called out as he jumped inside the newly transformed Jolt. "Move!"

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*Thirty Minutes Earlier*

*NEST Compound, Plumas National Park*

Arcee had been sitting with Bluestreak and Kass, talking quietly, when she noticed that something was off about the air in Hangar B. It seemed stiffer, warmer—tension radiated through the empty space. She turned and looked around slowly, trying to spot what was amiss. It was sometimes difficult to pick out threats from non-threats in their new home. To the majority of their team, the Autobots and their NEST counterparts were the threat, which went against all of her own instincts. Officially, she was not an Autobot soldier and was still considered just as much an outsider as any of the other ten were. Her allegiance still lay with Prime though, so she was careful in her interactions with the Autobots.

However, not everyone in their group was so keen on making an alliance with NEST or the
Autobots. Arcee worked hard to be seen as a quiet, trouble-free presence, while mechs like Wildrider preferred to do the exact opposite, without a care about how much damage it brought them as a whole.

With the majority of the human NEST members gone off with Jolt to retrieve the four new Autobots from the desert to the south-east, Arcee had anticipated a calm evening. Jazz and Thundercracker had left earlier with Prowl and Optimus to further discuss their plans for the future and Arcee wasn't too sure where Ratchet had disappeared to. Most likely the med-bay. He had mentioned the training of a human medic before, so perhaps he was busy.

That unfortunately left them with Ironhide and Sideswipe as their wardens for the evening. It wasn't quite time for the humans to go to sleep, so they all stayed awake, talking, reading or just resting. Sideswipe was thoroughly disinterested in all of them, but Ironhide did his job flawlessly, casting them a quick glance regularly from his position near the hangar door. Now that several of the crates had been removed, the hangar seemed oddly expansive. It also gave Ironhide far more opportunity to notice that Wildrider was purposely staring him down.

"What are you looking at, Decepticon?" the black-armored weapon specialist bit out, defensively.

Lounging coyly against a container they had claimed for cover, Wildrider tilted his head arrogantly to the side. "Not much," he said with the clear intention to rile their overseer.

Barns made a sharp sound and gave Wildrider a look he had taken to giving specifically to troublesome NEST soldiers. Wildrider ignored him, however. Unfortunately for them all, Ironhide was not skilled at handling Wildrider's temper tantrums. He fell for the bait.

"Don't get cute, punk," the Autobot weapons specialist replied harshly. He squinted his optics at Wildrider and flexed his hands at his sides. "One foot out of line, and believe me, I will end you."

"Oh, you think you are tough mech, because of guns?" Wildrider sneered as Ironhide started to turn away. "Guns are for veaklings."

Ironhide, again falling for the verbal trap, turned around completely. "More than enough to kill you, glitch head," he threatened.

"Ha!" Wildrider laughed, arrogantly. "I kill you with bare hands, like real mech. Your hands are stubby. Mine are sharp." He flexed his hands purposely; with the new energon they had been receiving, their armor was in immaculate condition.

"'Rider, please," Barns tried again, ever the peacemaker. With Jazz and Thundercracker away, Arcee knew that Barns was their only hope to get through to their more rambunctious members. Sadly, it wasn't working with Wildrider right now.

Wildrider leaned forward, keeping Ironhide's attention on him. "I am pointing out truth. You like to act strong to make us scared," he goaded, ignorant of the plaintive stares his friends were giving him. "I am not afraid of you. I can't say same for you."

"You implying something, 'Con?" Ironhide growled. At the far wall, Sideswipe finally looked up and peered at the two mechs with a neutral expression.

"You are afraid. Afraid of us," Wildrider replied, unafraid. "We are many and fight as one. You… you are in shambles, you NEST. You are not strong."

At that Sideswipe also scowled, but Ironhide continued to bicker with Wildrider directly. "Watch it, Decepticon," he snarled. "I will not tolerate you badmouthing this team."
"Make me watch it, you—," Wildrider said before spouting off an insult in Cybertronian that Arcee grimaced at. For a mech born off-Cybertron and without access to Kaon, Wildrider knew awful words. She was more concerned that Bluestreak was there to hear it, too.

Ironhide growled loudly at the insult and moved forward. Arcee tensed up before she realized who it was; as an Autobot officer, she knew he would stop himself, and he did. Vortex, though, had little faith in Ironhide's self-control and stood up, glaring dangerously.

Briefly, Arcee wondered if she should call for Jazz to come back.

"You will not strike because you are coward," Wildrider crowed, standing. He looked pleased by Ironhide stalking closer to him. "All Autobots are cowards. Little, stupid cowards."

Arcee glared at the red-and-black mech, knowing he was just doing this to torture all of them. "Wildrider, enough," she said shortly. He pointedly didn't look at her.

"Yeah, don't make him mad," Kass whispered hurriedly. She kept looking between the two arguing mechs with a frightened expression.

Sideswipe must have said something to Ironhide over their comm. links, because the larger mech started to move away, toward the hangar doors, hopefully to leave the hangar area entirely. Arcee frowned deeply; if they kept this up, she doubted they would ever be granted the trust she herself hoped they would eventually be given. She was no enemy of Prime's; she wanted to be an ally.

"That's it, walk away!" Wildrider shouted, leering fearlessly, breaking the silence. "Coward!" He took a step closer, foolishly.

That was all it took, in the end. "Give me one excuse, you pit-spawned wretch!" the black-armored mech bellowed, closing the distance between them.

Ironhide lashed out, slamming his cannon arm against Wildrider's shoulder. Wildrider fell backwards from the impact, leveled by Ironhide's larger size and mass. Arcee found herself upright and rushing forward, the humans all yelling out in fear. The worst had happened and they had to stop it before it progressed any further.

Without any warning, Vortex hurled himself between the two mechs. Arcee thought, for a split second, that the helicopter had made the right decision and only moved to push the two brawlers away from one another—

And then Vortex reared back and slammed his closed fist directly into Ironhide's faceplates, metal bending and shattering on impact.

_Oh, Primus_, Arcee managed to pray as Ironhide lunged for him with a fearsome roar.

0000

After almost a week at the base, Sam thought he had seen the majority of NEST's normal activities, considering the fact that Decepticon sightings were nonexistent and they didn't have much to do besides their regular duties, like drills and equipment maintenance. He was on his way to the cafeteria for a late dinner with Bumblebee in tow, thinking about what he was going to tell Mikaela about acting on Optimus' request the next day, when everything seemed to, as Miles would say, _wig the fuck out._

A siren burst out overhead and instantly, all of the soldiers near them took off running, shouting and answering orders. Bumblebee had stopped dead in his tracks and was looking out of the hangar they
were in with shock.

Stumbling back when Bumblebee suddenly moved away from him, Sam held his hands up to his ears to block the wailing siren. "What's all the noise? !" he yelled, a thousand worries flashing through his mind. Decepticons—a breach of security—someone was hurt—

Bumblebee was clearly already informed of the situation. He turned and gestured at Sam as he started to run backwards toward the exit. "Stay here, Sam, I mean it!" he shouted, leaving Sam standing there alone.

Sam very much did not want to just stand there like a lost pet while it sounded like they were under attack. Looking around, he saw several humans take off running in a different direction, headed for the doorway that led to the hangar adjacent to this one.

Hangar B.

Swallowing, Sam walked briskly after the NEST soldiers. No one saw him or said anything; he was all but invisible when he wasn't with a mech or with one of the higher ups like Keller or Lennox. He used that invisibility to his advantage today, however.

The closer he got to Hangar B, he realized that behind the blaring of the alarm, there were louder sounds. Screaming, both human and alien, battled for supremacy over the alarm and when Sam finally reached the connecting door to the hangar bay, he realized that there was a reason for it.

Somehow, despite the fact that Optimus had assured him that there was no threat from having more mechs on base, a full out robot death match had started. Sam heard it before seeing it; he heard crashing, screeching and metal smashing into metal as he turned the corner. He saw the NEST soldiers running and some were standing by, helpless as what sounded like five simultaneous car crashes went down only yards away.

Sam turned the corner and edged closer to the side of a large supply container—and saw Ironhide first. The giant black security officer was tangoing with the same helicopter mech that Sam and Mikaela had seen when they first arrived. This time, the dark grey mech wasn't just standing around; he was lunging at Ironhide with whirling propeller blades that sliced through the side of a container unit like it was made of butter.

Holy

shit

They weren't the only ones fighting, though. Sam gasped when he saw Sideswipe running toward Ironhide, but another of the neutral mechs met him halfway. The red-and-black mech slammed into Sideswipe and took him down. Sam instinctually ducked as they both hit the ground, the unfamiliar mech landing on top. The two grappled with each other fiercely, Sideswipe trying to keep the other mech from reaching for his spark chamber.

Sam flew back against the wall as the two mechs all but tore at each other with their bare hands. "Oh, shit!"

He saw Bumblebee standing a few yards from the fight, hesitant to jump in.

"Bumblebee, what's going on? !" Sam shouted; it was difficult to be heard over the screeching
"Sam, get out of here!" Bumblebee shot back. He whirled around and then focused on the other two fighting mechs. "Ironhide, no!"

Meanwhile, Ironhide was blocking the helicopter's movements; they were still upright and despite having the superior fire power, Ironhide was left ducking the dangerous blades the helicopter kept whipping through the air at him. Sam didn't know why Ironhide didn't just use his cannons, but...

He realized where they were and who was present. Ironhide couldn't just start firing aimlessly at the Decepticon—he might hit a human or damage the base. There just wasn't enough space. Sam prayed Optimus Prime would appear from wherever he had disappeared to—

"WILDRIDER!" someone was screaming. Sam briefly saw a brown haired man jumping up and down, screaming in French, of all things. "Arrêtez-vous! Arrêtez-le maintenant!"

Behind him, a Bumblebee-sized mech with door panels like Prowl was also yelling. "STOP!" he cried out at the fighting mechs, but that wasn't going to help.

There were more than just those two there, however. Sam belatedly realized he was looking at the survivor team, complete with four humans and four mechs, two of which were fighting. The smallest of them, a pink one, was ranting in Cybertronian at the four fighting mechs in the front of the hangar, clearly unable to intervene due to his—her?—size.

"STOP IT!" a black haired woman yelled, startling Sam. He saw her waving her hands helplessly as Sideswipe threw the red-and-black mech to the ground and they resumed their violent wrestling. "STOP HITTING HIM, YOU—YOU—JERKS!"

Closer than any of the other humans were to the fight, a blonde haired woman was screaming. "JAZZ!" she shrieked. "GET BACK HERE AND DO SOMETHING! JAZZ!"

Sam gasped when a silver mech and a huge blue mech with wings came tearing through the doorway at the front of the hangar. Behind them, Prowl was also running, looking harassed. "Primus—Ironhide!" the new silver mech yelled. "Ironhide, stop! Please!"

Briefly in all of the chaos, Sam realized that the mech yelling at Ironhide was Jazz. And that was all levels of Not Right.

Ironhide finally managed to grab the dark grey mech by the chestplates and shove him down, hard. The helicopter hit the cement, snarling, and everyone started screaming louder.

"VORTEX!" the blonde screeched again. The brown haired man lunged and grabbed her before she took off running toward the fight.

"Stop this immediately!" Prowl was shouting, his orders going unheeded.

The blue flier snarled and made to go after Ironhide in the helicopter's defense, but Jazz whipped out and grabbed a hold of his arm.

"TC, stop—STAND DOWN!" Jazz yelled, trying to get some semblance of order. It was comical to see him try to drag the giant mech back, but the smaller Autobot was clearly in charge when it worked and he started shouting orders out to the others. "VORTEX, WILDRIDER! STAND DOWN, BOTH OF YOU! SUBMIT! NOW!"

Sam drew back further against the wall as Ironhide slammed Vortex down again and he saw the
grey-Prowl-impersonator move forward to attack in defense of his teammate, but thankfully all of the chaos abruptly stopped when Optimus Prime literally appeared out of the darkness outside of the hangar. It stopped everything, including the fighting mechs, who all looked up in shock at the Prime.

Optimus wasted no time approaching, halting only yards away from both sets of fighting mechs, looking poised to leap in if need-be. "Stand down!" he shouted over the noise of mechs shouting at one another. "All of you!"

"Prime, please, don't hurt them—!" Jazz begged, reaching out for the Prime, stopping short when Bumblebee took a step toward him in warning.

Optimus glanced at Jazz, but focused on the weapons specialist and helicopter. "Ironhide, release Vortex now," he ordered. Sam shivered at the tone of his voice; he had never heard Optimus so angry.

"He attacked first, Prime!" Sideswipe protested from beneath Wildrider, who snarled.

"I don't care, release him!" Optimus snapped. Ironhide made a growling sound, but obediently moved back to his leader's side. Vortex managed to get to his feet, ignoring the helping hand the big mech—Thundercracker—offered him.

Jazz edged closer, looking at Sideswipe and Wildrider with his clawed hands up warily. "'Rider, let Sideswipe go. Right now," he said, gentle, but firm.

Wildrider shot the silver mech a crazed glare, but to Sam's surprise, slowly and smoothly retracted himself from on top of the red Autobot. Sideswipe rolled away and both mechs were left standing a few feet from each other on their own feet. Neither moved, despite the looks of hate they sent each other.

Sam exhaled the breath he didn't know he had been holding and prayed the tension in the room would dissipate. It would take a while, however.

"Now—," Optimus began, radiating both anger and frustration, "all of you, stop what you are doing and calm down."

"Tell that to your fucking soldiers, you son of a bitch!" the blonde woman suddenly burst out. She was next to Vortex and was fearlessly shouting up at Optimus and Ironhide, positively enraged. "You can't fucking DO this!"

Jazz made a sharp sound. "Rachel, stop it," he ordered. Rachel, as she was called, looked at him with red and watery eyes, but didn't say anything else. Thundercracker reached down and picked her up, placing her back with the other humans away from the circle of tense mechs.

Sighing, Optimus shook his head and looked at Vortex and Wildrider specifically. "I am sorry. What happened?" He looked to the side and caught Ironhide's optic as well.

The pink mech suddenly rolled up, frowning. "Wildrider acted foolishly, but Ironhide responded to his provocation with aggressive action," she—definitely a she by her voice, though Sam was a bit confused over that—said bluntly. She inclined her head toward Ironhide and spoke stiffly. "Clearly, you are not used to his behavior. He is harmless."

"Says you, femme!" Wildrider burst out with a snarl. He was crouching near Vortex and Thundercracker now, looking ready to leap out at Optimus now. "I should kill you!"

"Wildrider!" both Thundercracker and Jazz shouted at the same time in warning. Ironhide did
activate his cannons this time in a show of aggression. Sam gulped.

"Vortex was defending Wildrider!" the grey mech behind the humans suddenly exclaimed. Sam had to do a double take again; this mech could have been Prowl's double, chevron, door panels and all. "Wildrider shouldn't have been teasing, but he wasn't attacking anyone until Ironhide hit him first! Vortex got in between them and then Sideswipe jumped in after him!"

The black-haired woman tried to speak up. "It was self-defense," she said in a definite British accent. The humans with her nodded furiously and Vortex continued to glare at Ironhide in silence.

"Self-defense? !" Ironhide roared. "You are Decepticons! Everything you do is aimed to destroy!"

Vortex suddenly started to move forward, propellers whirling up again. "I'll show you destruction, Autobot!" he shouted. All at once everyone moved, either to stop them from meeting or to face the opposing side in preparation for a repeat of the last fight.

"STOP!" Optimus bellowed, startling them all. He looked around at everyone, even the humans standing with the mechs, with a fierce look Sam thought was usually reserved for the times he spent fighting Decepticons. "That is it. No more arguing, or ALL of you will be thrown into the brig."

Wildrider shot Jazz a look. "I thought they did not have vone," he said, sounding accusing.

"Yeah, well, we'll build one just for you nutter," someone called from the hangar entrance. Sam looked up and saw Jolt walking over cheerfully to the crowd of humans and mechs. "Hey, Prime, guess where we've been!"

Optimus glared at the light-hearted Autobot, the severity of the situation still very much obvious. "Jolt, this had better be good news," he warned.

Jolt wasn't that upset over the threat, however. "Yeah, we got the Hyperion team," he replied. He peered out at the mechs specifically. "Looks like you guys have been having fun."

"Sunny's here?" Sideswipe exclaimed, all but forgetting about the fight. He shrugged Bumblebee away and rushed out of the hangar, leaving Sam wondering just what the hell was actually going on.

Ironically, he wasn't the only confused party. As Sideswipe left, Sam saw a herd of NEST soldiers rush in, fresh from the field. Lennox was jogging in the lead and waved hurriedly at them. "The new mechs are in decontamination now," he said, cutting Optimus' question off. He stopped short of the Autobot leader and looked around wildly, as if waiting to find a bloodbath. "Now, Prime, what the HELL is going on? !"

"Long story," Optimus muttered. He glanced to the side and inclined his head at the helicopter. "Vortex, if you wish to see Ratchet for your injuries, please follow me. Bring whomever you want with you as a witness."

Even though the room was still impossibly tense, Sam watched as Vortex left with Optimus and Jolt, taking the grey-Prowl-look-alike with him as his companion. Thundercracker had wanted to go, but Jazz had asked him to stay. Sam saw him looking at Ironhide, who left afterwards. He was probably afraid another fight might break out if all the Decepticons went together. Prowl, who had watched silently from the sidelines, also left in a hurry.

Lennox had gotten a quick sit-rep from Bumblebee, with Jazz and Arcee adding their commentary periodically, before the Major rushed off after Optimus, cursing under his breath.

Briefly, Sam wondered where Mikaela was. He had one hell of a story to tell her later, that was for
sure. He looked up at Bumblebee, who looked a little tired now, but the scout suddenly began to walk closer to the eight remaining humans and mechs seated near the crates. Bumblebee glanced over his shoulder and nodded at Sam silently.

Oh. Yeah. The survivors, then.

Sam gulped. He hadn't expected to meet them so soon. Optimus hadn't told him everything he wanted Sam to ask or say—

He still found himself following Bumblebee, as if on autopilot. He stopped next to his guardian, a few yards away from the closest person, who happened to be the blonde, Rachel, who was shoving what looked like a shirt viciously into a dark bag NEST had given her. When both Sam and Bumblebee remained where they were, she finally looked up and saw them.

"Hi," Sam offered.

Instantly, the glare increased. "What the hell do you want?" she demanded. Behind her, Jazz turned around properly and moved closer.

Bumblebee flinched first. "Hey!" he reprimanded. Rachel didn't look impressed by his complaint, so Bumblebee turned back to Sam, motioning back at the eight figures who were now watching them blankly. "Sam, these are the survivors."

"My name's Sam Witwicky," Sam said, looking around at them nervously.

While the brunette man smiled thinly at him in a distantly polite way, Rachel physically turned on him. "Good for you," she said bluntly before walking away with her bag in hand.

Sam scowled, but Optimus had told him they were about as reachable as, well, prisoners could be. They didn't look like prisoners, but everything about this was weird.

Footsteps pulled Sam's gaze upwards, toward the face of a familiar mech. "…Whoa." Jazz peered at the human, swaying almost. His visor widened upwards. The recognition was obvious. "Sam?"

Around them, the others paid notice to it too. "…Jazz?" Sam repeated, feeling light-headed. He had seen Jazz's dead body. This was so weird. "I don't understand…"

"Prime told you he was here," Bumblebee said, amused.

"But…” Sam began, eyes huge as he looked up and down Jazz's frame. It was definitely the same mech, but… "Holy crap."

"Yeah," Jazz said, grinning now. "Nice t'see ya, Witwicky."

"You, too." Sam looked behind him noticing the varying odd looks Jazz's friends were giving him. He guessed they hadn't expected Jazz to know a human there, too. "Uh…"

Jazz, still the same pleasant mech Sam had known two years ago, turned and motioned downward at him for his friends to see. "Everybody, this is Sam Witwicky." He looked gleeful, teasing. "Accordin' t' this new timeline, this kid here saved th' world."

Sam blanched. "I, uh, no, I didn't, not really," he stammered. He felt odd being introduced that way, especially with the surprised looks it earned him.

Bumblebee rumbled pleasantly. "Sam wanted to meet you all at some point," he explained as the
Pink femme rolled closer and the humans began to give him more attention.

Rachel turned around and glared at Sam. "We're not a fucking petting zoo!" she snapped. Sam flinched away in shock. The black-haired girl next to Rachel sighed and quietly told her to knock it off.

Undeterred, Jazz smiled cheerfully, gesturing back at her. "That lil' ray o' sunshine is Rachel Cooper," he said, ignoring the death glare she sent his way. He turned and pointed at the flier and then the others in order. "Big guy over there is Thundercracker, or TC for short. This is Kass Hall an' Bluestreak just left…"

Jazz went through all of them quickly and Sam struggled to remember the names. Barns was the French one, the chick-robot was Arcee, the silent brown-haired girl was Danny… He hoped Bumblebee would help him later if he forgot who was who.

"Nice to meet you all," he said, nodding politely.

"I wasn't aware you were letting civilians in, Bumblebee," Arcee said coolly, gazing at Sam shortly before looking up at Bumblebee, both curious and defensive.

"Saving the world has its perks, I guess," Sam joked weakly. Coughing, he scratched behind his ear as a nervous tic. "Uh…so, um, do you guys need anything, or…?"

Kass, shuffling through what looked like sheets for their cots, snorted. "Aspirin would be lovely," she said. Pausing in mid lift, she added, "Actually, I could use something strong."

"I could use some alcohol personally," Rachel replied darkly. "That still exists, right?"

Sam shook his head. "Not on base." He tried not to imagine the chaos that could erupt if anyone there was ever drunk. "Anyway, I'm here with my girlfriend, Mikaela. She wanted to meet you guys, too."

Seated by Thundercracker at that point, Jazz jerked upright, shocked. "Mikaela's here? !" he exclaimed. The jet looked at him oddly and Sam felt a little bit like gawking at the silver mech as well.

"Yeah, she's with Ratchet right now. Did… did you know her—your version of her?" he asked, awkward.

Jazz nodding stiffly. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. Er, I did," he said, stumbling curiously over his words. "How is she—?"

Shouting outside the hangar made them all flinch. Sam turned and looked at the gate, expecting to see perhaps Vortex or Ironhide, but instead of a mech, he saw Lieutenant Epps marching their way. He didn't look happy, but no one on base tonight really seemed to be too pleased with anything.

"What is it now? !" Kass exclaimed; Barns sighed and leaned back against Wildrider, who growled lowly at the sight of the NEST officer.

"New mechs have arrived from the forward Hyperion team," Epps said, out of breath. Behind him, Sam could hear mech footsteps approaching. He could see a faint outline of the new figure behind the crate.

Thundercracker frowned. "That never happened in our time."
Yeah. I forgot to tell ya guys. A lot of stuff's changed," Jazz replied. He smiled wryly. "Hyperion's actually only seven months away, if ya can believe it!"

Arcee gaped at him. "Impossible!" she said. She didn't seem actually upset by this; if anything, she seemed happy.

Jazz laughed. "Yeah, well, th' Galaxus is out there, too. I was talkin' t' Prowl an'—"

The mech Sam had seen approaching finally stepped out from behind the crates and Sam knew it wasn't anyone he had ever met before. This guy was huge, almost as big as Thundercracker and Optimus. He was a pale blue color and Sam thought he saw the paint decals on his side being a text ad for some technology company. What was especially odd was his head. Sam had never seen an Autobot look like that.

"Oh," the new mech said, as he realized he was on the receiving end of eleven surprised stares. "I was looking for Prime. I was told he was debriefing the six Neutrals. I was curious to see them."

"Just missed him," Epps replied, exhausted. He apparently knew the new guy. "Everyone this is… uh." He stopped and shot the tall mech an expectant look.

Taking the cue, the new Autobot tilted his head at them. "Apologies! I just received this alt form," he said. He had a battle mask like Optimus did, but Sam had a feeling he was smiling. "I also finally picked my designation! I thought Hoist was going to go mad trying to help me."

Sam smiled and nodded, appreciative of the fact that the Autobots took a lot of care figuring out their translated names. He turned, on instinct, to the others in the room—

And suddenly realized something was wrong.

Very, very wrong.

Sam opened his mouth to say something, to ask Jazz why he looked shell-shocked, or why Kass was suddenly gripping her mouth in unabashed horror—when the new mech moved.

He stepped forward and as his battle mask retracted, he smiled at the survivors, ignorant of their horrified gazes.

"My name is Wheeljack," he announced. "Who are all of you?"

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End

Chapter Twelve.
A/Ns:
- Yes, the *Ark* is just a shuttle in this story. It's still pretty big though, compared to Earth vessels. *Hyperion* and *Galaxus* are even bigger, of course.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Sam stood in front of the new mech, confused. Aside from his oddly-shaped head, he seemed to be just another Autobot. But judging from the look on the other humans' faces, clearly there was more going on here than he knew about. Epps had also noticed the reactions of the refugees, the survivors, and was giving them all a wary look from where he stood, next to the new mech. Sam felt exposed standing there, even if none of them were looking at him.

No, they were looking at Wheeljack, as the mech called himself. They looked at him the same way Sam might look upon Megatron, if he ever came back the way Optimus had told him their Megatron had. He had no idea why they would be looking that way at a mech they just met—an Autobot, no less—

Unless… they knew him. From their time. Their world.

And judging by their looks… Sam gulped. Either it was fear… or something stronger.

Beside him, Bumblebee shrank away slowly, Sam following his movements, as Wheeljack continued to stare back at the eight people in the center of room. He could tell Bumblebee wasn't afraid, more nervous than anything else. That didn't mean something wasn't going to happen, however.

Standing apart from the rest of his group, Jazz stared up at the new mech with a tilted head and mouth open. Sam pressed against Bumblebee's leg, waiting for a reaction, heart pounding.

"'Jack?" the smaller silver mech asked, voice breaking off in a way it shouldn't have for a mech.

Wheeljack tilted his head. "Yes," he said simply, in the way Sam was used to seeing from Bumblebee or Ratchet. The strange things he had seen earlier on the side of the giant's head flashed brightly. "Ah, you must be Jazz. The second one, as I am told. Fascinating!"

Jazz just stared and something akin to horror and grief twisted his expression. Sam sank back against Bumblebee, now entirely uncomfortable. He didn't think they should—he didn't want to be there.

This was… this wasn't right.

"'Jack…" someone said.

Sam turned and saw more of the newcomers appearing around the side of Jazz. Barns and Rachel had horrified, traumatized expressions. Kass just looked heartbroken. Danny was staring up at Wheeljack with the first bit of emotion Sam had seen her wear.

It was utter grief.
Kass opened her mouth to speak, but words didn't come. She just stood there, shaking so badly, she had to grip her hands together. "This can't be happening," she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes. She never stopped looking up at the mech.

Jazz finally stepped back, devastated. He didn't even glance at the humans, who looked like they were fish out of water, gasping for breath. Wheeljack just stood there, looking confused.

"I'm sorry… I... don't know what's going on," he said, unnerved. He turned around and gave the only other NEST Autobot present a quick look, asking for help. "Bumblebee?"

Bumblebee glanced to the side quickly. "They… lost someone, in their time" the scout replied, voice static-y again from misuse, but also reluctance. "You."

A series of expressions—confusion, vague understanding turning to solid comprehension—washed over Wheeljack's faceplates. "...Oh, dear," he said, turning back around and giving the newcomers a sympathetic frown.

Well, at least he was a quick learner, Sam thought hysterically.

Jazz was still looking at Wheeljack in that horrified silence Sam would have normally thought was reserved for some kind of natural disaster. All of them were like that. Arcee, for all of her stoic behavior earlier, looked as near to tears as the humans did, and Sam knew Transformers couldn't cry. She refused to move from her spot, even when the humans gathered closer. The jet, Thundercracker, was sitting there, looking oddly pathetic and, if his wings had been like Bluestreak's or Prowl's, they would have been drooped low on his back.

The clanking of mech legs caught his attention. He wished fervently that it would be Optimus or perhaps Ratchet coming back in from the front of the hangar. Either would know what to do here. The awkward tension and the tears were beginning to make Sam want to just run out the door. That wouldn't be polite, however; these people had been through so much. This was... expected.

But it wasn't either Autobot. Out from behind Thundercracker, where he had been lurking (sulking, as Arcee had put it) the whole time, Wildrider appeared with a focused look. Clearly he had heard the talking, but he didn't look upset yet. He seemed more curious than anything. Jazz turned and opened his mouth to speak, now alarmed about something, but Wildrider didn't give him the chance.

Instantly upon seeing Wheeljack, Wildrider jerked backwards and then peered at the taller mech as if he were seeing, well, whatever made the crazy ex-Con happy. It wasn't a cheerful happy, just an unexpected one.

"You are Vheeljack," Wildrider said. The moment he did, it was like it validated something inside his processors and he started grinning.

"'Rider," Jazz croaked, reaching out to him.

Wildrider shrugged him away and moved closer, motions erratic. "YOU ARE WHEELJACK!" he shrieked. Wheeljack flinched back, but Wildrider didn't care. He spun around, practically hysterical. "Vheeljack isn't dead, isn't dead...! Danny! LOOK!" he cried, motioning wildly to Danny, who was staring at Wheeljack from her spot on the floor.

Danny didn't look at him. She just stared at Wheeljack without seeing anything else. Sam had to force himself to remember to breathe.

"Vheeljack is alive," Wildrider said again, spinning around to face the Autobot in question. Wildrider tilted his head and said, weakly, "Look. Just... look... he's alive."
The mech stopped entirely and looked back at Wheeljack, green optics blazing.

"…You are Vheeljack…" he said again, less enthusiastic and more… desperate. "Vheeljack?"

Having endured the entire spiel in silence, Wheeljack slowly shook his oddly-shaped head. "I am afraid I do not know you," he said, honestly regretful. "Perhaps you are referring to the double of myself from your own time."

Wildrider was an ex-Decepticon, Sam knew, and was probably the most insane out of the entire group.

But… the look on his face after Wheeljack had spoken… it didn't belong to a Decepticon. Wildrider just stood there, optics huge, mouth slightly agape… looking utterly crushed. The mech looked at Wheeljack and then down at the humans. He looked back up, but not at anyone there. He just stared outward into nothing, as if caught somewhere else entirely.

Barns made a soft sound. "Mon Dieu… oh God… I cannot…" He took a deep breath and covered his face with his hand, turning away. "Oh, God this cannot be happening."

Rachel was crying and had to look away as well. She sobbed loudly and turned around. She marched past the others and collapsed against the other side of the container, away from the rest of them. Sam winced; he didn't blame her for wanting to leave. He probably would have.

"I don't…" Wheeljack began, looking out of his element.

"Please, go. Leave," Jazz said, begging. He covered his faceplates with a clawed hand, gesturing with the other blindly toward Wheeljack. "We can't deal with this now."

Wheeljack started, but after watching the group in front of him, with only Thundercracker actually looking at him with some degree of calmness, he nodded. Slowly, he started to back away and Sam had hoped they could find a way to fix the remaining mess before something else went completely wrong—

"I…"

Everyone stopped, including Wheeljack. Sam turned slowly and saw it was a human who had spoken. It was Danny. She was standing just behind Jazz, having ignored everyone else the entire time, and was still staring up at Wheeljack with a heartbroken expression. Sam knew she had spoken, because everyone else had turned to look at her in surprise as well.

"They created family units within the larger structure," Optimus had told him three days prior. "Wheeljack, the dead mech, was a father to the human Danielle. She is the one who worries the human doctors the most."

Sam braced himself. He would have preferred Decepticons over dealing with this.

Kass, the closest to Danny, stared at her with growing concern. "Danny?" she asked, timid, afraid.

Danny, who had been quiet for all the time Sam had been there, started to breathe loudly. "I… want…my dad," she said, voice strained, filled with unshed tears. "I want my dad."

"Oh, Danny…" Kass whispered, trying not to cry as well. She reached out for her friend, but suddenly, Danny ripped away from her. She took two unsteady steps backwards, looking up at everyone. She had wild, distraught look on her face and she was crying freely now.
"I want him back! I want him back with us! Why did he have to die? ! WHY DID HE HAVE TO DIE? !" she cried, wrapping her arms around herself. Her screams echoed across the hangar, freezing everyone in the room. "I NEVER GOT A CHANCE TO TELL HIM I LOVED HIM ONE LAST TIME! HE DIED—ALONE! HE DIED ALL ALONE!"

Barns made a choked sound. "Danny…"

With a horrible scream, Danny sank to the floor and screamed over and over, crying hysterically.

"He saved me and I left him all alone when he needed me most. Oh my God—!" she sobbed, choking on air. Around her, her friends looked down at her helplessly. "I want him back—please, God, please, don't let—!" Danny curled up further and kept crying. "Wheeljack, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

Jazz moved closer, desperate. "Danny, it wasn't your fault!" he said. When he spoke, it was almost a warble. Since when did mechs get emotional like that? "'Jack made his choice an' it wasn't up to you, or any of us."

Danny shook her head, her sobbing never ceasing. "I should have been there! I should have been there with him!" she cried. "I wanted to die with him, I don't want him to have died alone—Primus, he was all alone."

"You couldn't have done anything," Barns said, crouching slowly next to her. He was crying, too. "It's… it's not your fault, Danny."

She let him wrap his arms around her and she sobbed loudly into the crook of his neck. "I want my daddy back," she begged. "Please, God… I just want my daddy."

The hangar was almost unbearable. Wheeljack looked incredibly uncomfortable and slowly backed away completely. Epps, who was looking even more harassed than Sam did, muttered something to the large mech and both made a silent retreat out of the hangar. Only Thundercracker and Arcee watched them leave; their expressions almost as loud as the others' voices.

Behind him, Bumblebee touched the back of Sam's head, shaking him awake like a splash of freezing cold water.

"Come on, Sam," he said quietly, ushering the teenager back toward the entrance. Sam willingly went, glancing over his shoulder one more time to see the eight survivors where they huddled and he shuddered.

Optimus had asked him to reach out to these people, to get them to trust NEST, because he wasn't part of the organization, but he was still related to the aliens. Sam had accepted the request because he thought it was simple enough. He never thought it would be like this; he had severely underestimated the word "survivor" and the task that lay before him.

…This would not be easy.

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Sleeping was hell, but waking was worse. Kass wasn't sure where she found the strength to open her eyes; everything felt leaden, including her eyelids. When she did look up and saw the cold gray metal ceiling dozens of feet in the air above her, she didn't have to worry about getting slammed with emotions. They were already there, as if she had never slept, or at least like the thoughts she had been thinking all night had carried on with the same intensity straight through her sleep. Awake, she was again given the chance to look at the truth.
Wheeljack was dead.

He was… dead. And they were not. They were in an otherworldly past and they had to make their next steps with both politics and faction names hanging overhead.

Kass took two breaths: a deep one to steady her and a smaller one to give her the power to roll over and face the day.

She looked out around her, at their little camp within NEST's impressive base, and saw for the first time in a few days all of her remaining friends, even Jazz and Thundercracker. For the past several days, both mechs had spent the majority of their time elsewhere, working with Autobot officials, trying to make things better for the ten of them. But after yesterday, Jazz and Thundercracker refused to leave their group.

When Vortex and Bluestreak had returned, they hadn't believed Arcee about seeing Wheeljack. But when they saw Danny's hysterics and the others' tears, they believed. They had believed the truth when Wildrider refused to acknowledge anyone, even Bluestreak, and sat there as if he simply couldn't see or hear them anymore. They had believed when Optimus came in with a solemn face and a promise not to bother them for a while.

"This is our failure," he said quietly to those who were still able to listen to him. "We failed to alert Jolt to the Cybertronian designation Wheeljack possessed before coming to Earth. He had no way of stopping him from confronting you. I am sorry."

None of them slept well. Rachel had stopped crying first and just sat there, probably ready to beat the slag out of something. Barns comforted Danny all night and it was unbearable to hear her sobbing; Kass was grateful that both had finally drifted off at some point. The mechs probably had to force themselves into recharge, though Kass could see Vortex was online when she woke up, and she could hear the telltale humming of consciousness from Thundercracker, though he wasn't facing her. Kass sighed quietly as she looked out at the others and wondered what the next step was.

The hangar bay was generally noisy at all points in the day, with soldiers moving around, even the most minute sounds echoing across the vast empty space around them. The utter quiet now wasn't peaceful so much as it was an absence and indicator that something was wrong. But it certainly ensured that the sound of sneakers on concrete caught her attention immediately. She looked up at the door and was surprised to see a familiar face.

The brown haired boy from last night, the one Jazz had seemed to know and that worked with the Autobot Bumblebee, was peering out from around the front of the hangar door. He didn't look alone, but he wasn't with his Autobot friend. In fact, Kass was certain she hadn't seen an Autobot presence near their taken-over hangar bay since last night. That was a good thing.

Kass glanced around and saw that no one else was looking at the lurking human. That was a good thing, she supposed. Half of her wanted to ignore the boy as well, but judging by his awkward pacing and shuffling, he probably wasn't going to go away until someone talked to him. She doubted it was due to him having some ulterior motive; he just struck her as a very awkward young man.

Standing up slowly, Kass made sure no one was disturbed by her departure as she started the short trek across the cement.

To his credit, Sam Witwicky didn't turn the other way when he saw her walking toward him. He did jump and spin around to face her with a rigid stance and startled expression. Kass then noticed his companion. A gorgeous young woman with long dark hair also peeked around the edge of the hangar doorway; Kass only knew a few names of the people who worked at NEST, but this new
woman was definitely not a solider. She had to be Jazz's friend, the civilian, Mikaela. This would be simple—the introductions at least.

Kass wasn't sure why she approached them, other than that she was the only one up. She doubted that any of her friends would have had the patience to do any diplomatic work, so she accepted the sudden materialization of an emotional autopilot as a way to get the job done.

"Hello," she said politely, stopping a decent distance from the two. The brilliant sunlight shone down on them, but her position within the hangar left Kass standing in cold shadow. She wanted to move out further, but she still didn't… couldn't… trust any of the strangers.

She didn't trust the sun yet.

Sam made an unintelligent sound, but thankfully, his girlfriend salvaged the moment. "Hi," she said with a kind smile. She held a hand out and Kass tried not to flinch. "I'm Mikaela Banes."

Kass smiled tightly. "Kassandra Hall," she replied, tentatively reaching out. Her pale hand clashed startlingly with Mikaela's tan skin. The sun tingled where it touched Kass's hand and she pulled away almost immediately. Mikaela didn't seem to mind the flinching behavior.

Shuffling awkwardly, Sam looked behind Kass and then back at her, though he didn't look her in the eyes. "…Are you okay?" he asked.

Kass felt her stomach churn. "Of course not," she admitted. She crossed her arms against her chest, though she knew that must have seemed defensive. "But we'll survive. We always do."

Sam bit his lip and shoved his hands into his pockets. That seemed to ground his thoughts. "I'm sorry. I really…" he began, hesitating. He finally did meet her eyes. He had a strong gaze, once he got himself together. "I'm sorry."

His honesty was moving, but also sickening. She didn't know why she felt like that. Sympathy was nice, but now, it made her feel ill. It was the reminder that sympathy brought that was the real problem, Kass mused.

"…Thank you," she said, nodding again. She smiled thinly, suddenly wanting to retreat back to the group. It was silly. "Is there something you wanted to talk to us about?"

"Yeah. Um," Sam looked at Mikaela, who seemed to be giving Sam the chance to take charge of the conversation, and ran a hand through his hair. "Optimus asked me to talk to you."

Kass frowned. Optimus wanted a civilian boy to speak with them? That was… odd. And mildly suspicious. "Why?" she asked.

Sam paused, looking at Mikaela again quickly, before looking back at Kass. He was trying very hard, she noted. "Well… I know you don't trust any of us. I understand that," he said, moving back a little. "I sure wouldn't."

Raising an eyebrow, Kass let Sam dwell on the stupidity of that supposed reassuring comment. Thankfully, Mikaela grabbed the fumbled conversation before Sam continued to make Rachel's diplomacy skills look superior.

"We're not with NEST. We want to be, but right now, we're just civilians," Mikaela said. She smiled, friendly and brilliant. It made Kass feel like she was withering even more in the shadowed part of the entrance. "We don't have any power over you guys. We just want to be able to talk to you as, you know, equals."
"We don't want to make you think you have to, though," Sam added quickly. "You guys don't need more authority figures. But if you need to talk to someone, and you don't trust Lennox or anyone else here, just know we're here and will listen."

"Who are you, if not NEST soldiers?" Kass asked, curiosity getting the better of her. She had never really asked Jazz the details of Mikaela Banes' origins with the Autobots or why either of them were still there. Considering the security they had around the base, it was a bit odd.

"We, ah, got involved when I bought Bumblebee in a used car lot, believe it or not," Sam replied, laughing slightly. "I had something the Decepticons wanted and we both got dragged into this whole mess."

Kass nodded, ignoring the vagueness of his explanation; she could respect keeping secrets. She certainly didn't want to tell NEST any of their more selective memories. However, something else bothered Kass about the stories Jazz had told her about these two humans specifically. She wasn't sure if it was right to mention it, though. Glancing behind her, she saw that Jazz was still recharging.

"...Jazz told me a little about you two," she said, turning back around. She smiled at Mikaela specifically, recalling the fonder memories of the war that had stolen so much from the silver mech. "Mikaela... you and he both fought side by side for a while."

That took Mikaela by surprise. "...Really?" she asked, practically stunned. Sam also looked surprised.

"Yes. You... were the last one he lost," Kass replied, wary of how much she was allowed to say, considering the whole time-jumping thing. She figured it didn't matter much at this point, since things were obviously so different. "His only companion until he met Thundercracker," she added. She looked back over at Sam. "He spoke highly of you, Sam. He said you were brave."

Sam caught the obvious message there. He wasn't stupid, clearly. "H-how did I...?" he began, wary. How did he die, he was asking.

Kass smiled, feeling the same disconnect she and the other survivors always felt when talking about the first few events of the invasion. It was their history, their legacy, but it was mostly a shadow. The drones had always been the more pressing concern.

"At Mission City," she replied. "He said you died early on, with Bumblebee." The yellow Autobot now had a face in Kass's mind.

Sam gulped, visibly shaken by the information he was dead in her world. "...Jeez," he said, stunned. He ran his hand through his hair again. "Our worlds are definitely different on that note, then."

"Yes," Kass agreed. She looked out at the soldiers milling about and realized how alone they were standing there. "So odd."

"Well, don't worry about that," Sam said, almost visibly brushing his shock away. He might have been awkward, but he seemed like a decent kid. They could use that. "We're here for you four if you need to talk about, like..."


"Yeah," Sam said, sheepish. He looked back at Mikaela, who just shook her head at his helplessness. "Uh, I'm not really good with this."

She could relate. "It's okay. Thank you for your help," Kass said, deciding to be grateful. She paused
and folded her hands in front of her. "We're... not really interested in talking to anyone right now."

They were more interested in reversing what had happened, or finding a way off the base, to find safety. She doubted Sam or Mikaela could offer them either desire.

"Right, right," Sam agreed. He gestured around them. "Well, ah, we'll be around the base. Or just ask for Bee or one of us."

Kass nodded again. "Sure. Do you live on the base?"

"No, we're over the state border, in Nevada," Mikaela answered. She pointed vaguely to the East. "Bee drives us over sometimes. I'll probably be here more than Sam will, when he heads off to college."

"Alright," Kass said. She looked back over her shoulder and saw Bluestreak staring at them with an intense look, as if he couldn't decide if he was going to walk over there or not. Kass decided her diplomatic gesture had been extended enough. "I should get back."

Sam seemed to be thankful for the dismissal, but he had enough decency to look her in the eye again with one more sympathetic expression. "I... I hope things get better for you guys," he said. His honesty was... still too sharp.

Kass smiled anyway. "Thank you."

She waved at them politely as they headed off to wherever they had to go and Kass turned around to walk back to her own miniature camp. Bluestreak was sitting upright and was watching her with wary optics. His doorwings were high and twitching: \\

agitation

Now that she had two Praxians to watch, Kass was sure she'd be able to make some headway in deciphering their silent language. That was almost exciting, if she ever had the will power to be enthusiastic again.

"Kass?" he asked as she approached, looking for a signs that something was wrong.

"It was nothing, Blue," she replied, with forced cheer. She sat down next to him and patted his newly shining gray leg. "Everything's okay."

It would be, or they would all die trying to make it that way. That much, Kass knew would never change.

"0000"

It was a sad day that had Optimus Prime yearning for combat over the tense, but still peaceful moments between fighting. He had never been a good politician, regardless of what his mechs said, and would have preferred to leave Prowl and Ratchet, an ex-senator, at the helm of communications. But he was the leader of the Autobots and took his responsibilities seriously, even if dealing with irate human politicians like John Keller was becoming a daily thing.

Some humans had a way of making Megatron himself look like a pushover, an impressive feat for a barely six-foot tall organic.

Keller arrived approximately five hours after Ratchet had stopped ranting angrily at anyone in earshot; Wheeljack was now confined to the med-bay and Hangar C, which he fully accepted. After Optimus had gotten the rest of the recent arrivals situated with Ironhide and Jolt for further debriefing, he had reluctantly gone to meet with Director Keller and Major Lennox in the command center. He wished selfishly that Prowl could be there as well, but the poor tactician was woefully behind on his recharge time. After all the work they had put in over the last two weeks, Optimus
figured the Praxian deserved a few joors of uninterrupted rest.

As usual, Keller got to the source of his irritation quickly and bluntly. It was a considerable relief to Optimus that Keller's personality was so different from Agent Simmons'. "What's this I hear about a brawl between the survivors and the Autobots?" he demanded, almost immediately upon entering the room.

Optimus sighed. "A brief altercation. It's fine now, Director," he said, having expected that to be the first concern.

Keller climbed noisily up to the catwalk. "I still need to talk to the newest four," he said irritably. Optimus knew the man well enough to know the anger wasn't actually anger; it was more of a psychological coping mechanism. "Christ. Alright, talk to me. What happened?"

"Two of the mechs got into an altercation with Ironhide and Sideswipe after an argument. It was caused by both parties," Lennox explained as he greeted Keller at the top.

"You said they're still agitated, though?" Keller asked, turning to face Optimus directly.

"They are grieving the death of their friend, a mech they knew from their own world, named Wheeljack," Optimus replied. He felt a twinge of guilt as he recalled the aftermath of the unexpected meeting. "Yesterday, we made the mistake of introducing them to one of the Hyperion forward team's mechs. It was the same mech."

"...The same?" Keller repeated, confused. He caught on quickly, however, like always. "A different mech, from this time period, right?"

"Yes," Optimus said, nodding. "It is not the same mech they lost, but the image and person is the same. They... did not receive this well."

Keller sighed heavily and leaned against the railing. "I can imagine," he muttered.

Lennox frowned. "You wanted to speak with them, Director?"

"Yes." The white haired DNI waved his hand. "About the whole... time travel thing."

"It's more a parallel dimension hop than time travel, precisely," Optimus replied, recalling Ratchet's words on the matter. "The boy, Rancourt, was quite clever about it."

"Whichever!" Keller said, impatient. He was most likely agitated by the notion of time travel itself rather than anything else.

Lennox, who looked far older than he had two weeks earlier, asked, "What did you want to know about it?" Optimus also leaned in closer, giving the Director his undivided attention.

Keller looked him in the optics, no longer apprehensive of alien contact, then turned to point toward Hangar B. "If this is true... and they're from a future where everything gets thrown to hell, why is this place so different?"

Optimus rumbled lowly. The question had plagued his processors this entire time and he knew they weren't the only ones asking it. "I'm not sure," he admitted. None of them were.

"I want to know," Keller said, voice severe. "I want to know every detail about their world and compare it to this one."
That was surprising to hear, though Optimus was vaguely sure what the human was talking about. "To find things that overlap?" Lennox suggested, uncertain.

"And to find where things diverge," Keller added. He crossed his arms and glanced between his two colleagues. "We cannot jump the gun about anything, like stopping events from happening, but I want to know it all, just in case."

"With the timelines changed, it may not all be relevant," Optimus said gravely, echoing the sentiments Prowl and Ratchet had both shared from the start of all of this. They probably had already long-since passed the point where their worlds were anything at all alike. "But I agree, Director. We should be prepared for the worst. This might just help us win the war."

Lennox, who Optimus knew was struggling with the whole time travel scenario still, nodded. "Right," he said, exhausted.

Turning his helm, Optimus faced Keller, knowing he had to speak up for the refugees. "Just... one request, Director," he began. The dark feeling in his spark never quite left whenever he had to speak about this, with Ratchet in private or even with their allies. "Wait for a few days. Our guests need the time to grieve. Their losses are still affecting them. Greatly."

Losing a comrade was not unknown to anyone within NEST's organization. Even Keller had once been a soldier and Simmons' days in the police force were apparently not as drama-free as he would have them believe. Optimus believed Ratchet's warnings to take the losses the survivors had suffered quite seriously. They were more civilians than soldiers now, even the Decepticons; the losses were far worse in that way, perhaps.

"...Fine," Keller muttered at great length. He gestured at them both person. "Get me answers, Lennox... Prime. Before it's too late." With a roll of his shoulders and another tight sigh, Keller continued with his job. "Now, about those new mechs."

Optimus inclined his head and started to run through the list of qualities and characteristics that Keller needed to know about the newest Autobot arrivals, but his processors were focused on another matter. He was not prepared to handle the backlash of the survivors meeting this new world—and its inhabitants—and he was certainly unsure of how to handle the refugees themselves. There was no precedent to follow with them; they had to make things up as they went.

Luckily, they were on Earth now and he knew from experience that nothing they would do or experience from now on would be comparable to any other level of the war. It was both a blessing and a curse that things were so different. They had done fine so far and that was all Optimus could truly ask for.

He just prayed they would be able to keep succeeding, for both the sake of Earth and all of its current inhabitants.

End Chapter 13

A/Ns:
-Making up parts of Keller and Simmons' back-stories. I could totally see young-Simmons as a cop, though his egotism would explain why he would jump for higher places like the CIA and Sector-7.
Since Keller was appointed during the Bush era (read: Republican) and was made Secretary of Defense, more likely than not he was ex-military. It's part of the job description, after all.

-In case the problem wasn't clear: The Autobots who were present at Jazz's debriefings knew who "Wheeljack" was by his Cybertronian identity. Unfortunately, Jolt was never told, and since Wheeljack didn't communicate his chosen name to Epps before he met the survivors, there was no chance for NEST to prevent his unexpected presence in their midst.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

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There was no going back.

Even if they understood why they were there, or if their own Wheeljack had somehow been able to explain it all, this jump that they'd taken was a one-way trip. They had no choice but to face the reality they were now living in. They were trapped there and, ultimately, the choice now was not how to escape it, but rather, how to *deal* with it.

And an essential part of making this new world their own, Thundercracker realized, was that they somehow had to figure out how to earn their keep without losing their minds—or their integrity. None of them were dealing well with the forced 'leisure' of their current status; they'd all lived far too active a life to be able to do nothing for very long. Even the winter they'd recently passed in the caves had been full of activities necessary to return power to the space bridge system. Although NEST had provided the humans with books, magazines and newspapers and allowed the mechs access to the Internet, there still wasn't enough to keep them occupied. They had too much time to think and nothing new to think about. The stress of the situation was taking its toll on their family, and he knew that he and Jazz needed to make something change, and soon.

They could not leave, no matter how much Rachel, Wildrider or Vortex grumbled. Even if Prime was legally obligated under Cybertronian law to release any Neutrals in his control, that meant little to the humans. They would be incarcerated by one group or another and Jazz was correct in saying that they were better off under the Autobots than the humans alone. Humans… could be very cruel.

Thundercracker himself had never wanted to be a leader; he had never felt he had the vision, the drive necessary to be a guiding force to a large organization. He had followed, not blindly but perhaps optimistically, those who thrived on the challenge of leadership, in search of a better future for the Seekers. But during those long years of struggle, when faction ceased to matter and their only enemies were the drones, he'd found he had a vision after all… he wanted his friends to live. And so he had stepped up to the plate, taking on the responsibility that he felt fortunate to share with Jazz.

When they'd been tossed into this new world, the Autobots had naturally gravitated towards Jazz, preferring to work with him and Arcee more than with Thundercracker. He had not resented this fact, it was a logical response to their odd situation. But that first debrief had been solely with Jazz, and later discussions had not touched fully on the events that led up to the advent of Galvatron. It certainly hadn't included much information on what was happening in the Decepticon ranks at that time. It had taken two weeks for the Autobots and NEST to realize that they needed to talk with all of the Cybertronians to get a more accurate picture of the timeline. It was well overdue, this breakdown of facts.

Keller kicked off the discussion with his usual bluntness. "Tell us everything,"
The command room was filled to its maximum occupancy of both human and Transformer personnel. Their own group was large enough that it occupied nearly half the room, though the only ones invited today were Jazz, Thundercracker and Wildrider. Thundercracker wasn't surprised to see Director Keller there, or Major Lennox. Unfortunately that rodent Simmons was also peering down expectantly from the catwalk. Thundercracker took pleasure in the fact that even standing on the catwalk, the humans stood no taller than his shoulder. The jet felt trapped by the Autobots that filled the remainder of the room: Prime, Ratchet, Ironhide and… Prowl. It took considerable effort on Thundercracker's part not to openly snarl at the intruding Autobot, because his systems did label the tactician with that particular warning whenever he saw him. However, Jazz was standing next to Thundercracker, so the jet decided to behave himself.

It wasn't easy to see Jazz's ex-mate alive, to talk with him and to see him talk with Jazz. Taking commands from him was even worse. But as Jazz reinforced to him after every encounter they had with Prowl, Thundercracker knew logically this should not be a real problem. Their world's Prowl was dead or gone. This was not Jazz's lost lover; this was just a familiar face, like the others were. Thundercracker tried to keep that perspective now as Jazz continued to explain their own history in depth for the first time since they had arrived.

Saying it out loud made everything they had experienced sound like one of Rachel's fantastical stories, the ones that never actually happened. Thundercracker let Jazz guide their hosts through the timeline that had somehow been averted.

"In 2021, we started findin' out that we couldn't leave Earth air space," Jazz was explaining, after going through a summary of NEST operations that had happened after Mission City. "No human satellites and none of our remainin' spy drones could make it out of Low Earth Orbit without gettin' destroyed. We thought it was the 'Cons, but it wasn't."

Thundercracker nodded in agreement. "Decepticons discovered this as well after Galvatron went insane and killed half of Nemesis' crew," he added. "Several Seekers that escaped him attempted to fly off the planet. I saw them shot down by an unseen assailant."

"Describe the attack," Prime coaxed. He looked intrigued, but also wary. Appropriate reactions, Thundercracker thought.

The ex-Seeker shook his helm. "They were shot down by a concentrated barrage of plasma beams. There were multiple origination points, but they were too distant for my system to track," he replied. He hesitated as images of the events prior to that moment flashed over his processors. "I… was not operating at optimum condition at the time."

Skywarp.

"Because of Galvatron?" Prowl prompted.

Thundercracker sent him a venomous look, holding his anger in check. "Because he'd just slagged my bondmate," he replied coldly. Prowl flinched visibly. The others who understood the term didn't look much better. Jazz gently grasped his arm briefly.

"How did you survive that, anyway?" Ratchet asked, astonished. He had seen Thundercracker's memories, but that was a question that had plagued the jet himself for all too long.

"I have no idea. Stubbornness. Luck," Thundercracker replied, shrugging. "Regardless, the airspace was controlled very tightly. We couldn't fly out ourselves, and we couldn't escape on a shuttle either."
"But why?" Lennox asked, exasperated. "Who was controlling the beams up there?"

"We're assumin' th' drones," Jazz said, shaking his helm. "Not that they're particularly intelligent, but they're organized an' well-prepared fer pretty much everythin'. Every biome, every counter attack, every species..." The silver mech looked down, smiling darkly. "It's like... they were engineered specifically t' do what they did."

Keller leaned closer, peering at him. "Which was?"

"Kill everything and anything that moved," Thundercracker supplied. He was glad the white-haired man had stopped flinching whenever the jet spoke. "They weren't made by Galvatron to win a war. They were made by somebody else with the intention of wiping out life. Their audience's grim countenances didn't affect him; he knew the truth. "That's what we've always concluded."

"Damn," Lennox whispered. He shook his head. "And the first time you saw the drones was in... 2012, you said?"

Jazz nodded. "Yeah. Ironhide an' I ran into some on a 'Con inspection down south, in Mexico. There were only a few, but soon enough they were popping up everywhere."

When Optimus glanced to Thundercracker, the jet anticipated the Prime's question. "I have just as little information to give you. Starscream was my trinemate, but he never admitted he knew anything about the drones or where they came from," he explained. "And Galvatron kept his secrets closer than ever, at the end."

"So, what... you're telling us that the Decepticons had nothing to do with bringing the drones to Earth, or maintaining them?" Simmons demanded, interjecting loudly. He sounded incredulous, which most likely all of them were feeling, but they at least were polite enough to let the survivors speak first.

Thundercracker glowered at him. "Yes." He disliked this human particularly.

"Who was controlling them, then?" Keller asked, baffled.

Glancing below him, Thundercracker caught Jazz's visor and both mechs stared at each other, silently gauging the other's opinion on an answer. There had been theories, but nothing conclusive from anyone. There had never been a way to confirm anything.

"...We never found out," Jazz answered at length. "We're assumin' th' figure known as th' Fallen was behind it."

"The Fallen?" Lennox repeated. None of the NEST officials showed any signs of recognition. Thundercracker sighed; some things were obviously the same. Unfortunate.

"Yeah. Never found out who th' dude was, but..." Jazz trailed off. He shifted uncomfortably. "Rider said he saw him once."

Optimus frowned deeply. "Wildrider saw him?" he asked, glancing at the red and black mech who stared at nothing, seemingly oblivious to the discussion they were having. Jazz had insisted on bringing him for just this reason.

Jazz nodded, grim. "Yeah. When he escaped from his team's shuttle. He said he wandered out an' saw..." The silver Autobot drew back further and Thundercracker rumbled lowly.

"It vas an orange mech." All eyes and optics fell on Wildrider when he spoke for the first time in...
days, his green optics bright and intent. "He vas on fire."

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Getting away from the ship was easy after the drones slipped off, their job done. Wildrider had had to climb over Drag Strip and pry Motormaster away from the blast door to their quarters before he could force it open and get out, but he didn't encounter much trouble after that.

He paused to wonder what had happened. The last thing he really recalled was getting energon rations with his brothers, and then the drones had appeared. The rest was a hazy wash of images, but even he could piece together—literally and metaphorically—what had happened. The last transmission they'd had from the Nemesis had said the drones had gone crazy, Galvatron had disappeared at the same time, leaving the command staff and everyone else dead or dying.

Well, Wildrider wasn't going to die. Not from the injury to his leg that prevented him from transforming, and not from the emptiness in his spark that echoed within him. No, he wouldn't die until his energon pump gave out and he wouldn't go to the Pit without taking half of his enemies down with him. Nothing else would be acceptable. His brothers… his brothers expected more from him. So… he walked. He walked away from the base and until the fires began to die out around the wreckage. He had to duck and hide from the still circling drones, but the swarms were gone.

At least, he thought they were.

Stumbling over the debris that had been scattered around the base, he almost missed the figure in the distance, nearly hidden by the swarm of drones. A mech. A lone mech, strangely alight in the dark grey landscape—quite literally, with fire surging over his frame. Wildrider stopped behind some debris, daring to just look at the mech, taking in the sight. The mech stood fearless in the middle of the swarm and the drones never touched him, instead surging around him like he was their beacon.

Golden optics flashed through the space between them and all Wildrider could see were the flames of this mech's armor, before the tiny gold lights disappeared again.

Glorious Unmaker.

Snarling into the bleeding air, his spark frozen with fear, Wildrider shoved away from the rocks. He set his worn feet to walking, and vowed not to stop, not until his legs wore down to stubs. A few seconds rest, but that was over—

He didn't think he would ever stop again.

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Wildrider's testimony had only further complicated the questions.

"So, this new guy, the Fallen, showed up… and… resurrected Megatron?" Keller began, struggling to keep up with it all. They all seemed taken aback by this. "With what?"

"I dunno. It took us all by surprise. He just flew down one day, grabbed him out of th' Abyss, an' flew away again. Nex' thing we knew, Galvatron was there," Jazz explained, leaning back against the wall. He hesitated as he looked at Prime directly. "You said… there's a piece of th' All Spark here." That had slipped out earlier in discussions, much to Keller and Prime's dismay, but it wasn't like any of the refugees could or would do anything with that sensitive information. Optimus nodded slowly. Jazz pushed air from his vents in mimicry of a sigh. "We never had that. When our Prime used th' Cube on himself, it was all destroyed."
"Just a freak chance a piece survived here, then?" Simmons murmured.

"Yeah, seems like it," Jazz said heavily. "In any case, th' Fallen disappeared an' Galvatron took control back from Starscream over th' troops."

Thundercracker nodded, confirming the intelligence. "Yes. Skywarp and I arrived with Starscream from our rendezvous on Mars. Nemesis came later, in 2014," he said. "We landed the vessel in a remote area of Romania, under water."

"Yeah, look fer water when lookin' fer ships," Jazz piped up. "Apparently they liked hidin' there a lot." Thundercracker did his best imitation of rolling his optics, though it was sadly lacking compared to the human version of the gesture.

"That's just great, water only covers seventy percent of the Earth's surface," Lennox muttered, making a note in his notebook. He motioned at Jazz. "Back tracking… Mission City. Jazz, you were obviously there."

"Yup."

"And… only you and Ironhide survived?" the soldier continued, hesitating.

Jazz paused and grew tense. "…Yeah, you and Mikaela too," he answered. "If ya want a death list, in order, fine." He averted his gaze and ignored the stares his ex-fellow Autobots were giving him. "First it was Sam an' Bumblebee. They had th' Cube, so a'course they were targeted first. The 'Cons got a good chunk of th' American soldiers, too."

"Starscream's initial attack on the convoy," Optimus concluded. "We realized it was him too late."

Surprised, Jazz nodded. "Yeah, actually."

"Bumblebee got his legs blasted off, the idiot, but he lived," Ratchet groused. He crossed his arms in agitation. "So did Sam."

"Huh. Lucky kid, then, at least here," Jazz laughed quietly. He shook his helm. "Well, Bee gave me th' Cube. Th' Air Force showed up an' ran Starscream off, an' we were able t' get comms back. Then it was Epps an' you, Ratchet. Brawl got you two."

Keller frowned. "How did you make it out?"

"Ratchet… blocked Brawl fer me. After that I just ducked an' shot when I had th' chance ta, kept movin' an' 'ventually Lennox an' I made it t' where Prime was fightin' Megatron." Jazz answered, shrugging. Thundercracker could still see tension rolling off his frame though from all of the questions stirring up memories for him. "You said Megatron got me here?"

Ironhide scowled. "Yes. You knocked Brawl around a bit, but when Megatron showed up, you didn't get out of the way in time and he grabbed you," he said, as if it were Jazz's fault.

"Figures," Thundercracker muttered. Jazz frowned and mock-slapped his shoulder. Both ignored the startled looks the others sent them.

"Anyway!" the silver mech continued. "Ironhide got pretty beat up, but we got th' upper hand when I handed th' Cube off to Lennox. He got it back t' Prime."

"And he used it on himself… like Witwicky did on Megatron?" Ironhide asked, optics narrowed.
"Yeah." Jazz smiled thinly. "But our Megatron was even more of an idiot. Th' Air Force blew him t' slag an' back b'fore that moment, an' he was still tryin' t' make a grab fer th' Cube. Optimus got another stab in, an' finished him. He used th' Cube an'... it was over."

Everything else after that was almost on par with the present's past events: NEST had been formed and Starscream had run for back up. What was different was the fact that in their time, the world had been told the truth far sooner (Keller scoffed openly at that notion) and it was only Jazz and Ironhide left alive of the Autobots who had come to Earth. Ironhide sent out the message for assistance, quite like Prime had here, but they'd had a longer wait than NEST and the Autobots here had. The two of them had traveled around the globe training hundreds of human soldiers, and once the Decepticons had returned to Earth they had split up, leading separate teams in an attempt to hold out until reinforcements arrived. Troops from the Hyperion and Galaxus had arrived much later. Perhaps that was because Prime had not been there to urge them to quicken their pace.

From there, Thundercracker knew their worlds diverged completely, specifically in what constituted as the present now. The future for this present day was unclear yet; they had no idea if the events of their future would be the events of the future in this world. None of them were happy to hear that. They had continued on with the conversation, regardless; Thundercracker saw that as wise. Even if things were completely different, it didn't hurt to be prepared for the very worst.

"Alright, so..." Lennox peered up at them with tired eyes. "What happened next?"

It was going to be a long day.

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Earth was a fascinating place. It was much larger than Cybertron was and the amount of organic material that covered it was outstanding. More than that, there were the creatures that lived on the planet, which were all quite unique whether sentient or not. The human race was particularly intriguing. There were so many qualities they possessed that confused the scientist in him, but it was also the first time in vorns that Wheeljack had felt vaguely challenged. He liked a challenge that was outside the realm of war.

However, as much as it would be a wonderful thing to explore this new world, Wheeljack knew he wouldn't have the chance for a very long time. NEST had enough problems keeping the presence of the Autobots a secret; it was not yet safe for any of the aliens to be walking around. The Earth wasn't ready for them yet and neither was the human race.

He would have been happy to study the humans at the base. Besides the soldiers, Wheeljack knew that Bumblebee's charges were around at times (though he wasn't sure if they were on base at the moment). Civilians would be more interesting to observe than the standard military figures, he was certain.

There was one other source of human contact on the base. That source, unfortunately, was more off limits than Bumblebee's charges, or perhaps even outside humans. The refugees had four humans in their midst and all of them were very much not interested in being observed.

Their reaction to his presence the other day had been... shocking, to say the least. He had been quickly briefed by Jolt when he arrived and had accepted the scenario of inter-dimensional travelers with interest. It would have been a learning experience to speak with them and find out what they had seen in their own world, and how it differed from this one. But he had not been fully informed about the situation, and they had reacted very poorly to his presence.

The humans' reactions were acceptable. They were emotional beings, and according to his data their
reactions had generally fallen within the normal parameters of the spectrum of human grief. He surmised that Danielle Elizabeth, as her name was recorded in the data, was so upset over his appearance because of her connection to a version of him from her original time. Upon querying Ratchet, Wheeljack had learned that his double had been her guardian. That was both troubling and interesting. How could she not be pitied, especially by him, who had unintentionally caused her distress? He wanted to apologize to her specifically for startling her so badly (his research indicated that it was unhealthy for such a breakdown to occur, quite like one of Prowl's system lock-ups), but she had not been the only one to react strongly to him.

All of the refugees had acted as if his presence physically affected them. He had recognized Arcee in hindsight, but she had also been very, even physically, repulsed by his presence. Even the Decepticon, Wildrider, had been shockingly emotional. With the more complete information download given him by Ratchet, he realized that they had seen him as part of their group and had recently lost him. The pain was still fresh, obviously, so they had to deal with their grief and he was certainly not helping by showing up while they were still distraught. Although he himself was not prone to emotional reactions of that magnitude, he respected their feelings about the matter too much to approach them.

He was still curious, however, and even more so when Ratchet finished the data download with a strict injunction against talking with any of them. Ratchet understood that wanted to talk to them and understand their situation more, but he would have to wait for a later date and another opportunity. It would be insensitive to push the issue at this time. Wheeljack fully agreed.

Several days after his first encounter with them, Wheeljack had not expected to see any of the survivors. Following the unfortunate scene in Hangar B they had retreated to their own space, away from most of the NEST officials, and no one blamed them. Wheeljack certainly couldn't. He had informed Ratchet of his intention of walking from the Medbay to meet Hound and Jolt by the compound's fence line to more closely observe the natural foliage surrounding the base. He hadn't studied organic life in many vorns, and was eager for the opportunity.

But his plan didn't work the way he had intended, as he walked alone past soldiers and container units full of what he suspected was more energon substitutes NEST had whipped up for them. Wheeljack had already approached Ratchet and Prime about constructing a proper energon converter, which he hoped he would be able to complete in his personal time even if the Decepticons started another offensive.

When he crossed the front of Hangar B, Wheeljack noticed another mech was standing out in the sun not that far from him. A Praxian, young, painted various shades of gray—and definitely one of the survivors.

Wheeljack froze and immediately tried to plot an alternate course to take. He couldn't avoid being seen by the mech, who was facing his direction from the start anyway. For a tense moment, Wheeljack though there would be a problem.

But as the green optics met his blue, Wheeljack didn't see fear or anger flare up in them. This mech just stared at him and seemed rather shy as he peered up at the taller mech. Wheeljack tried to think of a good way to leave without seeming like he was brushing the poor refugee aside, but surprisingly, the other mech didn't seem to want Wheeljack to leave. He walked up a little and stopped short in front of Wheeljack. It took him a few tries, but the refugee finally spoke.

"...Hello," the mech finally said, voice almost inaudible.

Wheeljack smiled anyway behind his blast mask and his earfins flashed in friendly colors. "Hello," he responded. "What is your designation?"
"Bluestreak," the gray mech replied. He kept his gaze up and didn't flinch, but his doorwings betrayed his feelings. "You're Wheeljack. Well, this world's Wheeljack." Bluestreak made a sighing sound. "It's... weird."

"What is?" Wheeljack asked, immensely curious.

Bluestreak frowned deeply and his doorwings flew up and down. "Referring to you as Wheeljack. You look like him, kind of. The earfins are the same, but you're a different color. And your alt mode is different," he said. He was almost complaining. "I guess that's because you're here earlier than our Wheeljack was. He didn't come down until the actual Hyperion did."

The other mech certainly liked talking. Wheeljack nodded. "I see," he murmured. He stood back as Bluestreak did likewise. "Well, one of my colleagues was ordered to investigate some odd gamma ray shifts our science division picked up one meta-cycle ago and considering that was his specialty, I was opted for the journey here instead."

Despite being rather shy, Bluestreak was clearly just as curious as Wheeljack felt over learning more about the other. "Who was it?" the younger mech asked.

"Oh, Perceptor," Wheeljack replied, "if you know the name." He wasn't certain how much actually crossed over between their different worlds, including persons.

Obviously some things did carry over. "I know of him, but, um..." Bluestreak stammered. How odd, that a mech would do that. It was clear there was some emotion attached to knowing the name at least. "So. You're... the same mech?"

That was a difficult question. Wheeljack had wondered the same thing all too many times over the last few days. He doubted this mech or many others, including himself, would have the patience to deal with the considerable amount of philosophical discussion that sort of question would require them to undertake. They would never get a real answer either way.

"I am not sure. I would not be able to tell you that," Wheeljack replied, honestly. He tilted his helm again, in sympathy. "I am sorry, Bluestreak, for your loss. I had no idea. If I had known, I would never have walked up to you all like that. It was very insensitive of me to do so."

Apologies were all too easy to say and felt empty at that point in his life. But he didn't feel right not to say something, after the emotional backlash the refugees had suffered due to his unexpected and unwelcome arrival.

Bluestreak hesitated and seemed to shift more awkwardly now. "N-no, it's okay. Just..." he began, fidgeting. He inclined his head back toward his tiny encampment. "Danny isn't feeling better yet. I'm not either, but she's even worse off than we are. Well, Wildrider is probably just as upset, but he's trying to be strong."

Wheeljack considered the name. "Wildrider... the red and black Decepticon?"

"He's not a Decepticon!" Bluestreak immediately exclaimed. His defensive reaction, clearly showing his frustration and restrained aggression matched the data Wheeljack had about other interactions between NEST and the refugees. "I wish you all would stop saying that about him, Vortex, and TC. They're not Decepticons anymore."

There was a distinct pause. Wheeljack tilted his helm, peering at the mech before him curiously. "... And you?" he prompted.

All at once, that seemed to undermine the emotional stability Bluestreak had managed to summon
during their exchange. "I…" Bluestreak began, failing. He sat down hard on a pipe that was lying out with other construction materials and he clutched his hands to his helm. "I don't know. It's so confusing. I'm Neutral, but I'm…"

Wheeljack frowned deeply as he watched the young mech sit there in despair. He wasn't familiar with the situation Bluestreak or his friends were in; he had never once questioned his allegiance to the Autobots or to Prime.

He could certainly understand despair, however.

"Your situation is strange and unprecedented. You need time to think, all of you," Wheeljack said quietly. He met Bluestreak's sorrowful optics gently. "I do not recommend switching your loyalties immediately. You are a good mech from what I can tell right now."

Bluestreak whined lowly. "I don't think we can be Neutrals here. Everyone else is already on a side. If we're not on a side, I think NEST won't trust us, ever," he confessed. His fear wasn't just for himself; it was for all of his friends. It was sad to observe. "We can't stay here. It's so cramped and we're used to moving around a lot. It feels like we're going to be attacked any moment."

Classic signs of post-traumatic stress. Wheeljack had immediately downloaded articles on human psychology after witnessing Danielle Elizabeth's breakdown in the hangar, out of curiosity. It was interesting that the human way of viewing victims wasn't too far from the Cybertronian way. Wheeljack wondered if Bluestreak's fear of recurring non-existent enemy attacks was shared by the others. Most likely it was.

Wheeljack wondered if the similarity in their ailments was just due to similar experiences while in danger, or because of some sort of psychic bonding the ten might have built up through their years together. It wasn't unheard of, though the humans in the mix complicated that scenario. He wasn't sure how three Decepticons could ever care for organics, but he wasn't one to ignore odd possibilities.

Then again, others might just say the ten had such closeness because they simply lost every other connection to life except one another. They equated the safety of one to the safety of them all. They worked as a single entity to ensure mutual protection for themselves, but in doing so, made it impossible to break away from that single-minded mentality even when in safety. That explained a lot of their actions, from his records.

"If that is why most of you are so agitated, you should not be afraid. This compound is nicely secured, though I am not sure if we will be moving at some point. I heard there are other compounds being constructed for our uses," he said, catching Bluestreak's attention. Wheeljack's earfins flashed in sync with his kind smile. "Even if the humans do not fully understand your choices, Bluestreak, Prime will be wise in his own decisions. I feel he does trust you ten and will do his best to respect your decision to be politically neutral."

"But what will they do with ten Neutrals?" Bluestreak asked, desperate.

That was another difficult question that the scientist couldn't begin to contemplate. It wasn't his place to know or to interfere. "…I do not know, Bluestreak," he admitted. "Try not to worry. Your friends, Jazz and Thundercracker, are doing a wonderful job as diplomats, I hear. You have Prime's support and I will put in a good word for you as well." Though how much Prime would pay attention to his input, he wasn't sure.

Bluestreak frowned deeply. "…You don't know us anymore though," he said after a moment.
Anymore. An inappropriate word to use for the situation, though Wheeljack doubted the younger spark noticed his error. The scientist sighed.

"I never did, Bluestreak," he said. He was a very different mech by default from the one they had lost. "But I know good people when I see them. After all, we have all spent eons knowing bad ones. The good are easy to spot out of the crowd because of that."

"True," Bluestreak answered. He made a strange sound as he added, "You're a lot like him. Maybe a bit more formal." From Wheeljack's newly acquired data files, he recognized the sound and movement as laughter. How odd.

"Forgive me for saying it, but you are very humanized," the scientist pointed out, curious. "All of you are, from what Ratchet has been telling me."

"It'll happen to you too, Wh-Wheeljack," Bluestreak replied. His stumble over the name made Wheeljack uneasy. Obviously his designation would cause just as many problems as his appearance would for the refugees. Bluestreak suddenly laughed again sharply. "Ha. Vortex once said that Earth had infected us. I can agree with that. We've been so used to living all by ourselves in our unit while in the wilderness, I guess it's hard not to go native."

An amusing threat. Wheeljack chuckled, imitating the archived emotional response data he had. "I suppose," he agreed. There were far worse things to happen.

Bluestreak finally smiled, only slightly. He glanced back to the encampment and seemed to move back toward his friends. "I should get back," he said. "I'm sorry everyone panicked." Bluestreak hesitated. "Kass says… some wounds take a long time to heal."

That was quite true and it certainly made communication with the victims of this unexpected twist of fate more difficult. Wheeljack knew that it would take a long time for any of them to be able to speak easily with members of NEST or the Autobots, and especially himself.

"I can empathize with that," Wheeljack said, sad. He nodded at Bluestreak in gratitude. "Thank you for speaking with me, Bluestreak. I have learned a lot."

As he watched Bluestreak return to his companions, Wheeljack reveled in the amount of new information and data he had received—including the realization that he was desperately unprepared for life on Earth. The refugees were just one more step to overcome. He had no doubts that Bumblebee was right to claim that they had to adapt to human culture in order for their presence to be accepted; he was far more convinced that it would be an experience worth having, no matter what sort of negative response his colleagues had to the suggestion.

Earth was their new hope, their only hope, for a better future. Even after listening to the horrible life the refugees had come from, Wheeljack realized that it was not Earth that had ruined them. If anything, it had saved them. It was fascinating.

He'd start with using verbal contractions. They sounded a little informal and perhaps a bit undereducated, but maybe going "native" was the best way to win the trust of both the humans and now ten already-native refugees. It would be an interesting experiment, regardless.

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"I just don't get why this world is so different. Why?"

Thundercracker looked over at Lennox, feeling just as tired as the human looked. They had catalogued hundreds of minute details spanning nearly fifty years of war on and around Earth,
sometimes going over things twice or three times. It was enough to make even the generally patient jet want to scream. He was certain that if Wildrider hadn't returned to their hangar by now, he would have found a way to blow up half the room.

"Well, things change," Ratchet said, shrugging. "You humans have a term for the phenomena: the Butterfly Effect. Small, minute changes in events that could utterly change large scale events in the long run."

"So, it's impossible to pin-point all of the changes," Thundercracker concluded, disinterested.

Ratchet nodded.

Lennox, however, seemed interested in finding something deeper than what they had covered. "… It's almost like it was Mission City that made the difference," he murmured, looking down at the notebook full of hastily scrawled notes he had taken during their discussion. "I mean, from my list, it seems like that's where the branch off really happens."

"But you guys said ya never ran into any other mechs, like us," Jazz insisted. "If th' scientists from our time who built th' machine really got here an' screwed with things t' change th' future, why didn't ya see anyone out of th' norm at Mission City?"

"No idea," Lennox replied. "Maybe we just didn't see them."

"How the frag do you miss two time traveling mechs?" Ironhide complained. He scowled darkly before anyone could correct him. "Dimension hopping, then."

Keller threw his hands into the air as if the question at been directed at him. "Don't go asking me about the crazy science fair you have going on around here," he snapped. He squinted at Jazz specifically. "For now, I'm grateful we haven't run into other Decepticons, let alone other mechs that are factionally unaccounted for. No offense."

Jazz chuckled. "Yeah." Then, abruptly, he tilted his helm at Prime and narrowed his visor. "So, uh, what exactly are we doing about that?"

Collectively, everyone in the room paused and looked at Jazz curiously, including Thundercracker. He had a vague idea of where Jazz was going with this, but they had talked about bringing it up at a calmer moment. Then again, they had no idea what to expect day to day.

"Us ten. We ain't Decepticons, no matter how ya feel about us," he continued, ignoring Ironhide's scoff. "I don't mind stayin' under yer watchful eye, but come on."

Ratchet glanced at Lennox briefly before peering at the silver mech more closely. "What do you want us to do with you, exactly?" he asked, clearly echoing the question the rest of his colleagues were wondering.

True to his nature, Jazz just shrugged the intense stares away. "Well, fer starters, I'd like t' help," he said simply. "With this whole future-present day match up. I don't know what I can do in th' long run, but I'm still an Autobot officer." He smiled winningly back at Ironhide, who was still incredibly defensive at that point. "Was an Autobot officer," he amended.

Optimus' optics narrowed, more in intrigue than from the irritation his weapons specialist was showing. "You're not the same Jazz we lost," the Prime said. "How can we trust you in the same way?"

Jazz shrugged again. "I ain't askin' fer my old job back. I know that you don't trust us. It's a good
sign ya don't. That way, at least I know yer th' same smart fellas I once knew," he said pointedly. "But don't be wastin' value resources in a war. You should know that best."

A sputtering sound surprised the mechs. "You're lucky you ten weren't actually thrown into a brig, built or not!" Simmons ranted. He looked thoroughly disgusted with the idea of having Jazz working with NEST officially. "I don't think any of you should be involved in official NEST investigations, period, outside of interrogations."

"Are you serious?" Jazz blurted, torn between being amused and insulted. He looked back at Thundercracker, aiming to be teasing. "Rachel acts more mature than that, an' we witnessed her goin' through puberty!"

"Oh, Primus, never mention that again, please," Thundercracker suddenly pleaded. He grimaced. "I'm still defragmenting my processors from it."

Their half-jokes fell flat with their audience. "Enough," Prime said shortly. He looked over at the human who had spoken against them with a patient glare. "Agent Simmons, you must appreciate the fact that these ten have knowledge we can use for the war."

Simmons scoffed loudly. "What war? Starscream hasn't shown his ugly mug since Mission City!" he countered. "Sure, if things start going downhill like these Negative Nancies are saying it did fer them, bring 'em in. But for now, they're political prisoners and we don't employ political prisoners for tacticians or strategists!"

Jazz peered up at the human with an oddly pinched visor. "Sweet Jesus," he began, "you still are th' same asshole."

The human turned a delightful shade of crimson. "Why—!"

Thundercracker did not bother to hide his smirk as Simmons railed on Jazz, who took a lesson from their daughter's book, and pointedly pretended to have malfunctioning audio receptors ("What? I can't hear ya over th' BULLSHIT!") which only led to an actual argument, with Ironhide throwing in his comments in about them becoming part of NEST's intelligence support and Ratchet snapping at both trouble makers for being ridiculous. Thankfully, one of the humans was not in the mood for unneeded banter.

"Enough!" Keller shouted, loud enough that everyone froze, including Prime. The white haired human impressively rounded on his underling. "Simmons, put a lid on it, please."

Simmons blanched and Thundercracker sighed quietly as the congregation gave the elder human their attention as he continued speaking.

"Look, I can appreciate where y'all are coming from, but we need to play it safe for everyone. If we need you, believe me, we'll ask for advice," Keller said, blunt and direct as always. Thundercracker sort of liked him. Keller sent Simmons a firm look as he continued. "Until then, they are not prisoners as much as refugees. Even refugees cannot be allowed to wander around the country without VISAs or, well, civil rights to protect them." He paused and gave Optimus a severe look. "And sorry, we haven't made the Amendment for alien civil rights yet, quite obviously."

Thundercracker snorted. He was rather impressed by the hospitality the humans were showing the mechs, but they certainly could improve on some levels of communication between species. He supposed they were better off than in their world, regardless.

He expected an argument, from the way Jazz was fidgeting and glaring, and from how Simmons
looked ready to start yelling again. However, the next peacekeeper to speak up was not Prime or Keller again. The next Autobot to stand up for them was the last one Thundercracker wanted or expected.

Prowl, who had been quietly observing from the sidelines for most of the day, stepped toward the catwalk and fixed Keller with a serious look. Then again, the mech only ever looked serious.

"I must insist you reconsider this, Director," Prowl began, frowning at Keller. "As Chief Autobot Tactician and liaison for the National Intelligence Office, I have to point out the value that comes with communicating on equal grounds with these survivors." He glanced sideways at Jazz specifically before looking back at the human. "All of them, including ones with questionable backgrounds. What matters most is the intel they provide. Surely we can spare the time and energy to listen to and catalogue their warnings."

Behind him, Optimus Prime rumbled. "I agree with Prowl," he said. When Keller opened his mouth to speak, Prime waved his massive hand at him to silence the man. "As you humans say, it's better to be safe than sorry. I see no harm in appointing these two particularly to an official liaison status. Their information may be for far future dates, but as you insisted yesterday, Director, if we see signs of their future becoming ours, we must be ready. This is how we can prepare."

Thundercracker was impressed by both mechs' statements, agreeing with them, but he said nothing. He refused to acknowledge the Praxian's existence as long as Prowl did likewise to him. Jazz grinned triumphantly, regardless.

Keller sucked in a short breath and for a moment, Thundercracker expected another fight. Thankfully, the white haired human had a degree of wisdom Simmons lacked.

"...Jeez." The DNI shook his head. "Those are valid points. I just…" He turned and gave Prime a firm look. It was amusing to see such a tiny creature give Optimus Prime such a chastising look. Thundercracker smirked when no one was looking his way.

"Be careful how you proceed, all of you," Keller continued and glared at all of them on eye-level. "Do not jump to conclusions based on what you're hearing. If they point out a location where Decepticons showed up in their world, for the love of God, don't just send troops in. Investigate visually or through networks first, so we're not invading other nations at the drop of the hat for a wild goose chase."

"Sounds sane," Lennox agreed, nodding at Ironhide and Prime both. "Or as sane as this possibly could be."

Jazz clasped his clawed hands together, clearly cheered up by this. "We'll be glad t' help," he said. He tilted his helm at Ratchet pointedly. "Give me some data pads an' I'll get ya copies of all th' intel I received durin' our war time. Maybe it'll help a little."

"I personally hope it doesn't," Lennox said abruptly. Jazz looked at him in surprise and the human smiled wryly. "No offense, but your future sucks. I hope ours is nothing like yours."

"Ha." Jazz smirked and nodded. "Me, too."

How any of them could hope for less wasn't clear. Thundercracker ignored the passing glances the NEST officials sent him as Jazz made plans with the Autobots. They all had hopes; for Jazz, he was praying this would somehow get their family into higher graces. For NEST, they thought they had been given some sort of cheat-sheet to the war. Perhaps both desires would be granted.
When Prowl looked Thundercracker in the optics briefly by accident, both mechs pointedly ignored the other.

*Yes*, communications could improve. Thundercracker wasn't interested in being the first one to move on that, however. He would wait for a better mech than him to take that step.

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**End Chapter 14.**

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Next, we get to enjoy a fun-filled interlude with Arcee and existentialism! But then, Barns and Sam have an interesting conversation...

**A/Ns:**
- Fallout Fanfic Fun Fact: Wildrider's flashback there was actually a deleted scene from "Fifty Years Ago." XD I'm glad I found a home for it here!
- Wheeljack's speaking habits here are what they would have been in their past world when he first arrived. He was very formal and over-analytical until he too went native. Perceptor may never adapt to contractions though!
- Sorry about Simmons, guys. I do actually like him as a character, but he does play the jerk very well…
Interlude 2: Broken

Chapter Notes

We take a brief breath of fresh air from the main plot and return to one of the interludes—this one featuring a topic I'm sure some of you have considered before: what of the ex-Gestalt survivors? Arcee makes an unpleasant discovery during the debriefing in chapter 14, after Wildrider comes back. Many thanks, Shantastic! Enjoy! **Warnings:** character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters.  

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The idea surged to life quite spontaneously in her processors after meeting Wheeljack—the other Wheeljack. As she thought about it, she realized that the she had been so wrapped up in dealing with the shock of their inter-dimensional shift and in trying to keep her friends safe and herself sane as they dealt with the strange hand fate had given them, Arcee almost missed the most amazing fact about this odd other world:

Her sisters were no longer dead.

Arcee had checked as calmly as she could with the Autobots, mostly to make sure she didn't make a fool out of herself by panicking or rejoicing too soon. It was true; her gestalt was still on board the *Hyperion* and were functional from what the Earth team knew.

At first, Arcee had stood there by herself, reveling in that realization without a clue as to what to do next.

And then… it hit her. It hit her hard.

*Her sisters were alive.*

She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry out in joy and rapture, thanking Primus for his mercy, for this chance to see them again. She still could remember with unforgiving detail what it had been like to lose them. It had nearly killed her, but that didn't matter now. They were alive.

And so was she. Arcee shook with both happiness and fear as she considered what that meant. Her gestalt programming had been turned off ever since her conversation with Wildrider had convinced her that was best, many years ago, back when Goddard had still been with them. Now, it itched like a fresh wound and she wanted to turn it on. She wanted to feel them for the first time in nearly fifty years.

She wanted to feel again, the way she had been designed, *created* to feel. No more of this mud-Earth feeling that Wildrider and Vortex seemed to have embraced with more grace than she had. Her physical senses paled when it came to feeling through their bonds.

In the end, it didn't take long for her to give in to the temptation—only a few days. She had her doubts, and feared that perhaps this was the wrong choice. She had left the programming off for so long, she worried that it would be too much to bear and she wouldn't be able to handle it.
But then, one night, Wildrider caught her alone. He'd spent the morning being debriefed with Jazz and Thundercracker, and upon his return he'd spent the afternoon sitting and staring at the hangar wall. She'd looked up to realize that he was looking at her, not his usual stare-through-you but an odd look that saw her, and she returned a lukewarm stare, as she normally did lately.

::I vant to feel it,:: he said over a private comm. channel suddenly. Arcee stared at him, stunned. He didn't wait for her to agree, simply stood up and walked away.

And then, against her better judgment, she stood to follow him. No one seemed to notice their quiet departure toward the back of their designated hangar—most of the children were asleep and Thundercracker was with Jazz and the other Autobots. Neither Bluestreak nor Vortex paid them any attention.

She made sure they were alone before she tried anything, fearing her own reaction. She ignored Wildrider pointedly, who also ignored her in return, both caught up in their own fears and hopes. At this moment, nothing else was important.

With a wary and hopeful spark, Arcee activated her gestalt programming. She prepared for the opening of the metaphorical dam.

What she wasn't prepared for, however, was the abyss that awaited her.

The locks in her wheel struts failed about the same time as Arcee felt her spark quite literally slam against its chamber, sending searing warnings of DANGER and GESTALT BOND UNRESPONSIVE through her processors. She didn't even need those warnings, as her body spasmed and threw her to the ground.

Her spark shrieked and it took everything she had not to scream out loud in similar torment.

Arcee grasped at the floor, etching deep scratches into its cement founding. Everything was on fire once more, her spark screaming with a symphony of agonized emotions, all heightened to almost unbearable levels. She couldn't think, couldn't see—all she could do was feel… or rather, feel how much she wasn't feeling.

Her sisters were still gone. The link was empty, dead, cold and barren.

She was still utterly alone.

"Why?" she asked, almost not realizing she had spoken out loud.

Why? Why was it still gone? Why was the link still there, and yet devoid of any life beyond her own mind? Her spark reached out in vain across the expanse of the broken bond and could only feel its own echoes.

Why? !

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair. Chromia and Elita-1 were still alive now. They were on the Hyperion, Optimus had said. They were still alive, so why—why was the bond still dead?

The clinking of her armor trembling was the only sound she could hear as her mind raced in circles. Then Arcee's optics widened as realization dawned her on her tortured mind.

It was because she was alive. Here, in this world, on the same ship that carried her long-dead sisters, she was alive. A different Arcee, who already fulfilled the third part of the three-way bond.
Arcee stared at the ground, agony renewed for an entirely different reason than the empty bond itself.

She had no place here, not in this world. It was already taken. Her bond, her presence as a member of it—it was irrelevant. She would never be the same Arcee that was part of the monopede trine here. She was extraneous, foreign, an unwanted appendage—a mistake to be ignored.

She had no idea how long she sat there, half-collapsed, her processors on the verge of failing. Arcee had no strength left. Her bond wailed and screeched throughout her silence and she was caught up in her own mind, trying and failing to accept this.

Her sisters… were no longer her sisters.

Shaking, Arcee could barely lift her helm when she heard shuddering, uneven footsteps near her. She didn't even bother to think about defending herself from an attack, which thankfully never happened. The pink femme instead gazed up into the faceplates of an ally, one who shouldn't have been an ally at all.

Wildrider stood there, clearly wavering unsteadily on his feet, optics shining brightly with his own grief. He kept listing to the side and Arcee could see fresh claw marks on his chestplates. He whined and Arcee felt him crouch lower, covering her with a cold shadow.

"My spark hurts," he said, his voice a hissing whisper. His emotions matched her own.

For the first time in her life, Arcee willingly looked up at his faceplates and found only sympathy and mirrored pain to share between them. They were two very different warriors, but this never-ending agony was something they would always have to endure.

"Mine, too," she replied, before her processors told her how foolish it was to say it out loud, oh-so weakly.

She had never been more pathetic, weak, especially not before a Decepticon.

But Wildrider… was not a Decepticon. Not anymore. Arcee shook her helm slowly, optics offline. She could not pretend he was a Decepticon any more than she could pretend that she could still feel Chromia and Elita-1. Even after nearly a decade of living and working together, she and Wildrider had almost nothing in common—except this. This agonizing loneliness.

*Primus, give us strength.*

She didn't say anything when his helm touched her shoulder. There was no way she could hold up his larger form, but she didn't… couldn't turn him away. He didn't lean on her though, and Arcee found comfort in the tentative touch as she painfully and reluctantly turned off her bond programming. The pain washed away, leaving a haunting echo that forced a whining cry from her vocalizers.

They sat together and mourned in silence, words useless. When Arcee finally pulled away, Wildrider said nothing.

They greeted their returning friends in continued silence when night came and by the next day, Arcee's spark no longer hurt.

In passing, she sometimes saw Wildrider look at her with a far off gaze, and every so often, she saw Vortex clutching at his own spark chamber with a haunted expression that nothing—not even the comfort of their other companions—could ever soothe.
Shuttering her optics in those moments, Arcee prayed for peace.

End Interlude Two: Broken.

Next chapter coming Wednesday!

A/Ns:
- My reasoning for no-Gestalt bonds for the survivors who belonged to them in the other world is this: they already exist as completely separate people in this reality. The bonds are already filled and accounted for. There are no more open links, because the links that they, the survivors, had had never existed in this world anyway. Even if Arcee met her other self and her sisters, they aren't "her" sisters. Same goes for Vortex and Wildrider and their brothers.
- In case you forgot why Arcee would even talk with Wildrider about this, look back to Fallout chapter 42, "Touch."
Heading into his second week on base, *Operation Salvage Survivor Relations* was a go. Sam liked the name, even if Mikaela's unimpressed stare had made him sulk for nearly a whole evening. She had it easy, he complained. All she had to do was pay attention to Ratchet's little tutorials on how to patch up mech injuries and then pass the proficiency tests and she was set to work at NEST full time. When he said this, she thwacked him with her pillow, hard enough to send him tumbling to the floor. But they both knew his complaint was grounded in truth. Since Sam was most likely going into the politics involved in NEST (really, it was the only thing *open* for employment), he had to get a degree, a longer and less secure route. At least Ratchet would give direct feedback on a person's progress… Sam was left guessing whether he was on the right path or not. But he knew that once he did have the degree, having this in his back pocket as a little, "hey, look, Mr. President, I have experience dealing with alien problems!" note would definitely be a plus.

The problem, of course, was the very nature of his assignment. He could only stay on base until his classes began. That left him with a little more than two weeks to somehow charm his way into the refugees' good graces and find out how to keep them happy on base. So far, this seemed like an insurmountable task.

Bumblebee dropped him off at Hangar B every morning, after Mikaela scampered off to the med-bay to harass Ratchet ("I'm learning, Sam, unlike some people!") and Bumblebee went off to do whatever task he was supposed to do that particular day. Sam didn't spend a lot of his day in Hangar B, however, because sadly enough, he never seemed to get past the first step: re-introducing himself.

"Hi!" he called out cheerfully as the dark haired woman he had spoken to before walked by with the Praxian, Bluestreak. Her name was Kass. He had memorized all the names, including the mechs'. "I'm Sam Witwicky. D-do you remember me?" Kass glanced at him, sighed quietly, but then kept walking straight by him. Sam wilted. "Oh…kay… I guess not."

It wasn't him, Bumblebee said reassuringly at dinner. They were just disinterested. It didn't matter if Sam was a soldier or not; he was still a stranger. It was frustrating, but Sam kept trying.

"Hey, you're Rachel, right?" he said, aiming for *casual* and landing in *awkward*, as he leaned against the hangar bay door.

The blond woman glared at him as she marched past him, following her friends as they came in from relaxing in the sunlight.

"Go away," she snapped.

Sam stepped forward, desperate. "Wait, I just wanted to talk to—"
Rachel whirled around with a raised fist. Sam ducked and rushed back to the exit, knowing his time was better spent on the less-homicidal ones.

But they seemed to know his intentions, which were kind of obvious to start with. Sam didn't understand why they didn't want to at least acknowledge him, but maybe he was being too pushy, like he had been with Mikaela at first. He just needed to give them space. They certainly gave him enough of it, which was frustrating to no end; they moved with no less than two people generally, or they just holed up together in one big group. Sam felt awkward just walking up to the group, especially if Vortex or Wildrider were there, glaring at him with just as much intensity as if he were a real solider.

In short, Operation Salvage Survivor Relations wasn't going too well. But Sam kept trying, day after day, because if Optimus Prime asked him to do something… well, he was going to do his best. He could offer his friends that much, at least.

So by the fourth day, Sam resigned himself to spending every morning sitting at the entrance of the hangar bay, meeting Mikaela for lunch and then coming back around three to sit around for another few hours. He told Mikaela and Bee he was making himself available ("Y'know, just in case they have questions or anything."). He tried not to be too obvious, because he knew they'd just glare at him nonstop (that girl, Rachel, had a fucking gift for being able to do that; it was almost supernatural). He felt awkward and stupid, just sitting around like that waiting, but what else could he do? He had to give them space, but still had to be close enough to show he was willing to be there when they needed him.

Apparently, his perseverance paid off, in its own way. He had expected Kass to be the one to come back and talk to him, like she had before, but on the third day of his vigil, just as Sam was debating the merits of knocking off a little early to get something cool to drink and hopefully get out of the sun, he heard someone walk up.

A tall man, older than Sam by only a few years, stopped short of where Sam had decided to sit, in the sunniest corner of the door arch. The only human male in the group, Barnaby Rancourt was easy to identify.

"Hey… Barns, right?" Sam began hastily, getting to his feet. He tried not to seem too eager, but this was the first time any of the survivors had approached him directly in almost a week.

Barns nodded, smiling kindly. "Yes," he said, voice only slightly accented. He held out his hand politely, which Sam took. "Hello, Sam."

Sam grinned. "Hi." He looked behind Barns, but couldn't see any of the other refugees. "So, uh, you gonna chase me off, too?"

That earned him a laugh. "No," Barns said, chuckling. He reminded Sam of a French Optimus Prime; pure patience. "You have to forgive my friends. We are all, ah, rather on edge these days."

"Of course," Sam replied quickly. He waved his hand. "It's not a problem. I don't want to be a creep, or whatever, but…"

Barns' dark eyes shone with amusement. "Prime asked you to get to know us," he concluded. Kass had probably told them everything, anyway.

Sam cleared his throat. "…Yeah. 'Cause, Lennox and Epps are great commanders for this unit, but the soldiers aren't used to dealing with civilians, you know? And I wouldn't leave you guys with Simmons or one of Sector-7's left overs," he rattled off. He quickly gestured at himself. "Not that I'm
a doctor or whatever. Just a civilian like you are."

"I would hardly call myself a civilian, Mr. Witwicky," Barns said, though he laughed about it. He peered closer at Sam, intrigued by something. "Though, I wouldn't call you one either, from what Jazz has told me. You were quite the hero in this world, I hear."

Sam winced and moved backwards instinctively. He had heard enough of that sort of praise in the last few years, especially from his parents. He hated it. "Nah, I just, I was just in the wrong place at the right time, you know?"

"I understand," Barns said, surprisingly without a hitch. He suddenly inclined his head toward the outside of the hangar. "Walk with me?"

That was the kind of invitation Sam had been praying for. He hadn't even had to suggest it. "Sure!" he blurted. Barns started off and Sam had to walk briskly to keep up with the longer-legged man. "So, uh, you're French?"

Mikaela would have laughed at his poor conversation skills, but Barns just smiled. "Yes. My mother was British, but I was raised by my French grandparents," he explained.

"Cool," Sam said, nodding. "So, you're French, Kass is British... um, I'm going to assume Rachel and Danielle are Americans?"

Barns chuckled lowly, not exactly ignoring a group of soldiers that walked by. He kept his eyes in front of him as he spoke afterwards. "Although Rachel, Kass and I do claim those nationalities, I hesitate to say that we really are, since the countries no longer existed in our time. Danny isn't American, or at least, we don't think so. Her parents died when she was just an infant and... she never met another human who knew them," he said. He shrugged. "For all we know, she could be French as well. Most likely Spanish, however."

Sam nodded slowly. "I see..." He glanced back at the hangar and looked back at Barns, who was looking at him again. "She..." Sam swallowed hard, suddenly feeling out of his element once more. "I'm sorry. About Wheeljack. Especially about him and Danny. God, I feel awful for you guys."

Apologies didn't mean a whole heck of a lot, especially when it came to tragedies, but it was all Sam had to offer. Barns' expression changed only slightly and he went back to staring out as they walked slowly along the edge of the hangars. Sam wasn't sure if they were allowed to walk around aimlessly, especially Barns, but screw the rules; Sam was on a mission.

"It's alright. We will overcome this, just as we have everything else," Barns suddenly said. His jaw tensed. "He is not the first person we lost from the group and I know he won't be the last. We have all lost family and friends. It's... something that happens."

Sam bit the inside of his cheek. "Not here. I promise, the Autobots and NEST, they're on your side. They won't hurt you guys," he said. He stumbled mentally, trying to find the right thing to say. "O-or split you up. I promise, I'll fight Keller if I have to." That would be an amusing sight and he'd probably fail at it, but Sam would try.

Despite his melancholy, Barns stopped and gave Sam an amused, curious look. "Why are you trying so hard to be friendly?" he asked.

The question caught Sam off guard. "Because..." he began, unsure of how to respond. It made sense in his head, but that didn't mean it would make sense to anyone else. "Because... everyone needs a friend," he said, knowing that was a lame response. He kept going, gesturing back at Hangar B.
"Especially if you're as alone as you guys are. You're not Autobots and you're not Decepticons. You guys need someone to back you up."

"Why?" Barns asked, still amused.

Sam hesitated, for only a moment. "Because it's the right thing to do," he said, honestly.

That earned him a pause. Barns stared at Sam with an intense look. "Righteousness is a luxury we don't always get," he replied calmly. He smiled again. "Thank you, Sam."

"No problem," Sam said grinning. He started walking and Barns followed. "So, how are you guys settling in? We should probably get you guys a real room with beds, but I don't know where else they could put all ten of you—"

They came up on a turn, one that led beyond the hangars for the mechs and led out to open space left for the military vehicles. Sam had actually intended to turn, to walk around the hangar complex completely, but he stopped short to let a jeep pass in front of them. Barns had stopped too and Sam thought it would only take a few seconds.

Without much warning, the car backfired and Sam jumped a little in surprise. The car kept rolling, so he didn't put much weight in that being an issue for anyone present.

However, when Barns physically jerked back, nearly flying into one of the red container units lying parallel to Hangar A, Sam realized there was a problem. Sam opened his mouth to speak, but words failed him as he watched Barns fall backwards, scramble to the side and latch onto the side of the crate in a flurry of movement that seemed almost supernatural.

"Hey, are you… are you okay?" Sam asked, stunned. The jeep had long since vanished from sight, leaving them alone again.

"What was that?" Barns demanded, his voice shrill. Sam had to concentrate in order to realize that he had spoken in English and not French.

Sam watched the other man curl up against the crate, chest heaving. "Just a car. Hey, relax," he said. He hesitantly raised his hand toward the other man, pausing when Barns flinched again. "It was just a car, Barns. Uh, normal cars sometimes backfire. My chemistry teacher said it had something to do with combustion."

Barns took several deep breaths, closing his eyes tightly. "I…"

They stood there for several moments and Sam felt a strangely ill sensation sweep through his stomach as he watched Barns try to collect himself. Sam wasn't entirely sure what he was seeing, but he already knew, almost, what the problem was.

Suddenly, he felt overwhelmed and severely out of his level of emotional expertise. He had a fleeting desire to call for Ratchet or even one of the other survivors to fix this, but he wasn't even sure there was a way to fix it.

"…It's okay, Barns," Sam said, fumbling for something to offer the other human. He stood back more since more space was probably the only thing Barns wanted. "I'm sorry."

"N-no. It's… fine," Barns managed to say. He gripped his face with his hand, blocking his eyes and expression from Sam. "I… give me a moment, please."

That much, Sam could do. He stood back a little more and waited in silence as Barns sat there in
silence. His whole body was rigid and his shoulders were hunched defensively. Sam frowned and said nothing.

Ratchet had warned Sam briefly, after Optimus had given the human the run-down on his job, that post-traumatic stress was most likely affecting all of the human refugees, perhaps even the mechs as well. They'd jump at loud noises, have irrational fear of anything out of the ordinary, and a significant lack of trust in anyone outside their circle. Sam knew the term, but he had never actually seen someone react in fear that way. He had had nightmares over Mission City, but he'd never had issues during the day.

Perhaps, Sam thought with sobering seriousness, a doctor would be a better person to handle this whole thing.

Barns took several minutes to gather his wits, though Sam was willing to wait a bit longer. He wanted to run to get Bumblebee, but decided against that thought, fearing to leave Barns all alone in the middle of the airfield. The refugees had to see him as a friend and he wanted to be a friend to them. From the looks of it, Sam knew they desperately needed one.

"The only time we heard explosions were in fights," Barns suddenly said, surprising Sam. The brown haired man on the ground looked up at Sam with squinted eyes. "From our team, but we only fired on drones. The explosions… meant drones."

Sam shook his head, remembering the term. They were the real threat the survivors had faced, even more than the Decepticon forces, oddly enough. "Not here," Sam said, reassuring. "They're not here."

Barns laughed, the sound strangling in the air. "I know," he said, nodding. He sat back against the crate with a distant, empty look. "I can still hear them."

All at once, Barns stopped breathing heavily. He swallowed hard and continued to speak, as if he were just remembering things instead of actually realizing where he was, in the present.

"They moved like a bunch of snakes all attached to a single head. Like Medusa." Barns shivered, the gesture clearly visible "They were shaped like Medusa's head."

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. He watched as Barns struggled to continue and he left the older man take his time. He couldn't offer anything else but more time.

Barns inhaled deeply several times. "Only one red eye. It saw almost two hundred and seventy degrees, we've always thought," he said. "When it moved before seeing prey, it was so smooth and agile. When it saw us, it moved as fast as a lightning strike."

There was a pause. The only sound between the two humans was the sound of Barns breathing shaky breaths. Barns stared out past Sam with dark, red-rimmed eyes that seemed to be seeing something far away from where they were standing. His eyes were looking at monsters Sam realized, monsters that Barns could still see clearly, even though they were fifty years in the future, or weeks in the past.

Standing in the warm August sunlight, Sam shivered, too.

"I can still hear the sounds they made," Barns whispered. "Like rain on metal, or… I cannot describe it."

Sam crouched slowly and gently touched Barns' shoulder. "It's okay, Barns," he said, meaning it.
Barns shook his head. "No, it is not," he said. "I don't know why I am like this. I know we aren't in danger." He laughed sharply as he pulled back, away from Sam. "I feel like I can't breathe."

"It's normal," Sam said, feeling horrible for saying that. Barns looked at him questionably. "I… uh, Mikaela, she was talking with Ratchet. You guys went through real trauma. It's going to linger."

Smiling thinly, Barns nodded. Both men sat down on the cement. "Unfortunately," he agreed. "I will survive. We all will."

That was almost like a resigned statement instead of an optimistic one. Sam grimaced. "Yeah."

Sam thought they would escape back to the safety of the hangar, where, well, Sam was hoping one of the refugees or the Autobots could take over his poor attempts at emotional comfort. He wouldn't move until Barns moved, though—he didn't want to risk this fragile détente they had achieved, and Barns seemed content to sit in the shadow of the container for the time being. It wasn't too awkward, thankfully.

"It's odd. No one here is really that concerned. With our future, I mean," Barns said, shaking his head, sighing. He sounded better, strangely. "Jazz and TC told us last night that it was okay, though. Our worlds are too different to be the same."

Sam crossed his legs and peered back at the Frenchman. "Well, do you think there's a chance things could happen the way they did for you guys?" he asked. He didn't think it was possible, from what they had told him earlier, but…

Barns shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps," he said. "As long as Megatron is not resurrected, I believe we will be fine. That was the real turning point."

"Maybe…" Sam frowned. "Bee told me Mission City is what was really different. I don't know why."

Memories of the battle were never far from Sam's mind. He couldn't shake the feelings sometimes, when he thought of the violence, the explosions… He did his best to avoid thinking about his experience there. Now, after what Bumblebee had told him, Sam felt pressured to remember what had happened. He tried to think of what could have been so different about their Mission City that, well, they had literally changed the future.

"You survived it," Barns said, smiling gently.

Sam snorted. "I doubt I'm the key that saved the world from a horrible future," he said.

Mikaela would have teased him mercilessly for the potential ego trip she'd assume he was having over this. Not that he was feeling particularly important from it. In fact, it made him light-headed trying to figure out how anything he could have done could have changed things. Time travel wasn't exactly high school physics. It was something that made even the Autobots stop and have to think, apparently.

"You did it once," Barns replied. He leaned one shoulder back against the crate. "You killed Megatron."

Saying it like that made it seem like Sam had taken a sword and slain some dragon. Sure, Megatron wasn't anything to scoff at, but Sam… hadn't really done anything. He liked the fact that his mild heroics had earned him the chance to stay with Bumblebee, but he never felt like he deserved half the
praise his parents or Optimus gave him. All he did was shove the Cube into the chestplates of a mech who was actively trying to kill him. He figured anyone else in that situation would have done the same.

"Yeah, but he was dead in your world, too," Sam mumbled, picking at a scab on his knee. He didn't really want to relive his moments of terror—or glory, or whatever his mother called it.

Barns hummed softly. "...True." The older man squinted at Sam, curiously. "Maybe Megatron was the key. Having him would give the Decepticons the advantage."

Sam frowned. "Yeah, well, good thing that won't happen."

"Why not?" Barns asked, surprised.

Shrugging, Sam gestured vaguely eastward, toward the far off Atlantic. "Well, the body's in this huge ocean trench. No way they'll get to it there."

"The Laurentian Abyss?"

"Yeah," Sam looked up at the silence that followed and saw Barns staring at him in silence. The look was not the same genial, easygoing one from earlier.

"...Sam," Barns began, his voice firm. He looked ill. "That is the same place they kept Megatron's body in my world." Slowly, Barns shook his head. "It is not safe there."

That... made no sense. It was actually mildly terrifying.

"...Really?" Sam asked, sitting upright. "But... surely NEST knows that, now that you guys're here. They'll have done something to protect it." There was no way Bumblebee or Optimus would just stand by and let something like Megatron's resurrection hang out there as a possibility.

"I would hope," Barns said, grave. He slowly stood up. "Sam, if they are not guarding the body, that's just asking for trouble."

Sam didn't want to even consider the possibility of Megatron getting hauled up out of the ocean, unless it was to be tossed into the sun or something. He remembered Ironhide suggesting that a year ago; now it seemed like a good idea. While Sam didn't want to turn Megatron into some kind of bogeyman, hell, there was no such thing as overreacting when it came to inter-galactic war.

"Yeah, yeah, it is," Sam mumbled. "Shit. Come on. Let's go find Bumblebee. Maybe—maybe they're already working on it."

Barns' severe look only grew darker as they started to walk briskly toward the opening of Hangar A. "This world is calm compared to mine, Sam. Too calm. All of us are waiting for something to go wrong, for the other shoe to drop," he said. "If this one detail is all that is preventing your future from becoming my past..." he was silent for a moment. "Let's hurry."

Sam had come out to the base to hang out with his friends, and then had been recruited to help out by doing some counseling, which he'd thought would be like... hanging out with friends. He was now learning that it required him to think about Mission City, and his own role in that battle, much more than he'd thought it would. He reflected that he generally did his best to avoid thinking about the damned war any more than he had to. But Sam Witwicky had realized almost two years ago that this war and his own life were forever intertwined like some terrifying joke fate had played on him. There was no escaping Megatron's shadow—not until they absolutely knew he was never coming back.
To their luck, Sam spotted Bumblebee right away. The yellow scout was walking slowly with two other mechs, both newcomers and Sam struggled to remember their names.

"Hey, Bee!" Sam called out, catching their attention. Barns walked more slowly behind him now, wary of the three mechs. Sam stopped short of Bumblebee, glancing over at the two new mechs. "Uh, Sunstreaker and Hound?"

The tallest new guy was a yellow color, paler than Bumblebee, and the shorter one was dark green. Sunstreaker, unlike his brother Sideswipe, only seemed to scowl. Hound at least managed to smile and wave back.

"Hello, Sam," Bumblebee replied, cheerful. He noticed Barns, but carefully kept the attention on Sam. "Sunstreaker. Hound, you know Sam, right?"

Sunstreaker only stared, but Hound nodded. "Yep!" he answered, his accent amusingly Southern. "Ah, yer Barnaby Rancourt," the green mech suddenly said, pointing at Barns, who stood ramrod straight beside Sam now. "Ratchet gave us a briefin' on you an' your friends after our own checkups."

Barns nodded stiffly, his entire posture and tone reminiscent of someone at a board meeting rather than talking with aliens. "Hello," he said briskly, nodding to each mech, before turning to Sam's guardian. "Excuse me, Bumblebee. We were talking about our—our situation and we were concerned about something."

"Was there anything done about Megatron?" Barns asked, cutting Sam off and just getting to the point. His bluntness surprised the Autobots, but he kept going. "I know that Jazz brought it up at some point in your talk, but was anything done?"

"What do you mean, done?" Sunstreaker interrupted, defensive.

Barns kept his eyes on Bumblebee. "I mean, did they destroy the body? If not, how are they protecting it?" he demanded, hurried.

Bumblebee visibly hesitated. "Well… that's not something I think we can talk about," he said slowly. "Not that you're not trustworthy, either of you, but…"

"There is little room for politics when we need to safeguard the future, Bumblebee," Barns replied, his patience apparently thinning. He gestured out across the hangar, plaintive. "Please, speak to Prime. Get him to convince the humans to release the body. It must be destroyed."

Sam shifted uneasily on his feet, that warning echoing across his mind. Bumblebee also looked unsettled by what Barns said. Sam had seen the effects of what Barns' world had been like, with the refugees' behavior coming to mind first—

That future was not something Sam wanted to see. Ever.

"Or else?" Sunstreaker challenge, irritable. Sam wondered if he even had other emotions.

Barns glanced at him, fearless now. "Or else you are giving our enemies the chance to create the future my friends and I barely escaped from. A future where you and all of your friends are dead, where the only humans who survived are scattered and hiding, where the very Earth itself was ruined and unable to recover." Barns turned and gave Bumblebee a severe look. "Do not gamble a game we
cannot afford to lose again, Autobots."

Sam shivered.

Bumblebee nodded. "I will speak to Prime, Barns. Don't worry," he said, carefully. He looked up and fixed Sam with his bright blue optics. "Sam… don't worry. We'll handle this."

*How?* was the first question Sam wanted to ask, but he held his tongue. He had to trust the Autobots and Optimus to do the right thing. The human government had to understand, wouldn't they? They saw what state the survivors were in, they had heard the stories…

"Right," Sam said, smiling weakly. "Of course you will."

Something would be done, one way or another.

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Years ago, she had talked to Barns about dreams. It had sounded boring from the data Arcee had received when she arrived on Earth, but listening to the young boy explain it, it had sounded fantastical. Transformers didn't dream. They had stasis, but only hard-filed memories and data packets were retrievable during that. Sometimes even now she'd wake thinking she heard drones, but those were just from residual memory files that had accidentally been classified as important enough to recall, mostly from fear. Barns called them nightmares when that happened, which were akin to dreams.

But she could not dream of things that she had never experienced. That's what truly separated the Transformers from the humans when it came to their different versions of sleep. Arcee didn't see the point at first, dreaming of impossible or silly things. It didn't seem important. Then, she'd hear Danny tell them stories of flying, or Rachel would explain that her latest fiction plot had come from a dream of people and places none of them knew. It sounded… pleasant, at least compared to their ordinary routines.

Arcee was beginning to think she had discovered a new subroutine, however, that allowed her to do just the same thing—because never in a million vorns did she ever expect to be walking in the shadow of the Prime. She had never again expected to online to the sight and presence of nearly ten other Autobots. She had never expected to escape her world, only to find a better one waiting for them—a new world where they could restart their lives.

There had been losses, overwhelming and nearly insurmountable. Arcee clutched at her chassis when no one was looking, grieving in silence the loss of her sisters, even in this place, where she had believed at first she could rejoin them, regain what she had lost. Sometimes, she'd cast a look toward Danny, Wildrider or Vortex, wondering just how they were coping… if they were coping. She said nothing, knowing that as similar as their grief was, it was a personal thing, something that words would only agitate further.

But everything else? It was impossibly perfect. Their group of survivors had found the Autobots first and now they were receiving care and supplies. The Earth around them was flawless and all signs of the war were nonexistent. The human military was nervous about them being there, but Arcee knew that the Americans would be hospitable in the long run.

The most pressing issue, however, was what to do with the Neutrals. Arcee didn't want to lump herself into that category; she wanted to just cut through the politics involved and rejoin the Autobots. She’d be happy to enter as a grunt; she didn't care about rank. She just wanted to help, to be a part of her race once again.
Logically, however, she had to look at the situation with patience. There was no active fighting going on. They didn't need her to be there, truly. They'd have to go through the politics of figuring out just how to deal with and classify time-traveling/dimension-hopping people. Once that was handled, Arcee knew Prime would allow her to join. He was wary about promising anything in the open, she knew, but she knew her army. They always accepted enlistment requests. She'd do whatever they wanted to prove her loyalty.

Or she'd thought she would.

Her blind dedication to all things Autobot had been broken by the brawl. She had snarled and snapped at Wildrider and Vortex both for ages afterwards, citing their stupid aggression as the chief reason they were still treated like prisoners. But she has seen it herself, and watching Ironhide and Sideswipe launch their own attacks on her companions had given her an alarming sensation. She had almost attacked them in the defense of the ex-'Cons. Ironhide—an Autobot officer! She held back and was grateful Prime sorted the matter out so easily, but she couldn't shake the feeling that the Autobots were dangerous, even to her, after that event.

The humans also alarmed her, greatly. After the incident with that Agent Simmons, Arcee was very hesitant to allow any of their human friends to wander near the NEST soldiers unaccompanied. It was wrong to be so defensive, she thought, but she couldn't help it. Danny was still practically comatose and Arcee was very concerned over Barns' lack of sleep. She feared what would happen to them after the politics were cleared up. They, unlike the Autobots, were natives to Earth… just not this one.

What did that mean? Arcee was filled with dread when she approached Jazz about it, and he was equally unsure. He rattled on about Social Security numbers, familial lineages, and birth certificates—all of which the four humans were missing. Legally, they did not exist. The Cybertronians in the refugee group could, theoretically, just be grouped with the Autobots—if the Autobots were ever given official documentation as resident aliens of Earth. The humans, Jazz pointed out with some degree of alarm, were Earthlings and therefore might not be covered by that kind of documentation. They were subject to Earth laws, such as VISAs and deportation.

"Where the frag would they send them?" Thundercracker demanded harshly. "They have nowhere to go. They didn't come from another country. They came from another time."

"Which is why I'm hopin' Keller'll pull some strings an' get them Green Cards when things cool down," Jazz said, trying to be calm himself. "Best hope is that they get lumped in with us aliens an' get our version of a Green Card, if we get one in th' future. Technically, th' kids aren't really natives t' this planet."

Bluestreak hummed. "Why do we need a green card? Is it because of our optics?" he asked, curious. Jazz had just sighed.

So, Arcee also worried about the humans and their lack of documentation. Officially, as far as this world was concerned they had never been born and didn't exist. They couldn't even use their grandparents or parents as proof. As far as anyone was concerned, most of their grandparents were children and unless circumstances went south in a hurry, most likely would never meet. So…

"We'll never exist here," Kass said quietly one night. She looked contemplative.

Barns shrugged. "It looks that way," he said. "My parents met during the evacuation of England. If that never happens…"

"And if America isn't attacked, my parents won't meet either," Rachel said. She was the most
disturbed by this turn of events. "I mean, Christ… my grandparents… I don't know if they're out there right now, but if they are, they're practically my age!"

"They aren't our grandparents," Kass warned, frowning. "We won't exist here. They aren't… anything to us anymore."

All four humans sat in silence and were forced to dwell on that unsettling notion. Arcee was sympathetic, but had no idea how to comfort them. This was beyond her expertise… it was beyond all of their knowledge, really. There was no precedence for any of their misfortunes. They would have to, as Jazz claimed, "wing it." Arcee prayed it would work to their advantage.

At night, she'd usually transform to recharge, but halfway through the night, she'd have to turn back into her mono-pede form. There was no logic to it; the base was secure. They had no reason to have watch duty any longer.

But many nights she'd end up staring out into the darkness, waiting for something. Arcee wasn't sure what. Moments like those had her spark racing, anticipating another fight that would hopefully never come.

This was a better place, she told herself over and over. This world was theirs too now, and they had to make the best of it.

It wasn't easy. It wasn't easy to try to rest in their makeshift camp, avoiding the optics and eyes of the others, who also lay awake from night terrors or their own doubts. It wasn't easy to listen to Danny cry and be reminded of Wheeljack, or to watch her friends teeter on the brink of collapse, emotionally and physically, as they tried to deal with what they had been given.

One day, Wildrider had been pacing like a caged animal and seemed ready to do anything, including attacking their on-duty Autobot guard, Bumblebee. Arcee thought of chastising the red-and-black mech for antagonizing the NEST officers on purpose.

But that… wasn't quite right. He wasn't causing a problem, yet. And she couldn't blame him for being antsy. Not now.

So instead of saying anything, she moved over to sit against the container unit that made up their camp's back border and waited. Wildrider watched her move and then looked down at the vacant spot on the cement.

He sat down next to her and didn't resume one of his pacing episodes for several days after that. Perhaps his aggression, like the one building up inside her own chassis, was stemming from the fear of their impending fate. Perhaps they would be separated. Maybe they'd be forced to choose between Autobot and Decepticon loyalties and be unable to choose neutrality. Wildrider, especially sensitive to their group connection, seemed to calm down only when someone else reassured him they were still together. Arcee could do that, if only to keep them all safe.

Getting up every morning and watching the world go on without them wasn't getting easier, though. Once they got through their grief, they would still have to prove they didn't need to be locked away. Arcee found herself trailing after any Autobot group that wandered by in the day and watching them from a distance. She didn't know why she watched them, her spark yearning to be one of them again, because she knew a part of her remained seated with Wildrider, with the humans, with their grief.

It wasn't fair.

When she found what she had finally learned to dream of for thirty years—
It was still just beyond her reach.

Arcee watched as Ironhide and the twins walked around the open hangar, discussing strategy with NEST officers. That had been her job, just less than half a century ago. She had been one of them, one of the heroes, one of the good guys — and she had been good at it. She had fought and nearly died for this world. Now... now, she was less than an alien, less than a Decepticon even. The survivors were trapped in a nothing zone, where their very existence didn't register on any political or physical scale. They weren't just strangers—they were nonentities.

Sooner or later though, she told herself, as she rolled away from the hangar bay doors, the Autobots would see the benefit of working with the willing members of their team. She would do anything to get in Prime's good graces again and be seen as a valuable soldier once more.

Until then, she prayed they would not need her.

End Chapter 15.

A/Ns:
"Medusa" – She is a Greek mythological monster who had a serpentine body and a head covered with live snakes as her hair.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thanks again, Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Last night had been a disaster. Lennox had thought the worst of the political nonsense had ended when they'd finally finished debriefing the refugees and sent all the intel to Keller, who was planning to review the data before taking it to his superiors (the President and his Joint Chiefs of Staff). When pushed, by Ratchet of all people, he'd said that the situation was stable for now, and he would address the legal status of the survivors later. Although he knew the refugees were antsy for action, later was better, in Lennox's opinion. Pushing the head honchos to make a decision quickly would probably backfire, whereas if they waited, chances were the issue of the refugees would be superseded by some other crisis, and they'd be given green cards without a second thought.

But of course, there had to be something else. There was always something else. There had been discussion about the location and safety of Megatron's remains at least twice before, but the topic had been dropped in favor of more pressing concerns. Last night Bumblebee of all mechs had brought the issue to the table, with a surprising amount of determination. Apparently Sam had been speaking with one of the refugees about the possible future and how it intertwined with the present day. He'd become agitated enough to talk with Bumblebee about it, who had also become concerned. Jazz had been thrilled to have support from an Autobot, and had vigorously argued that they needed to do something more to protect the body from the Decepticons.

Lennox wasn't going to deny that Megatron's body—and what could become of it—was an important issue. But he was tired of the arguing. Keller was back in D.C. and by the time the issue had come up in their discussion, it had been really late on the East Coast. Lennox wasn't the only one who thought it would be better to wait and address the issue with him when he returned to California, or at least at a time that was not the middle of the night. He was sure Simmons would have been happy to weigh in on the issue, but he'd gone to Diego Garcia the day before to work on the transfer situation, leaving Lennox to deal with the concerned parties mostly alone.

"There isn't that big of a concern over the issue," Keller had told Lennox multiple times, both in person and over the phone. "I mean, we have the shard locked up tighter than Fort Knox in the security bunker. You and the Autobots are right there. It's the safest place for it, so my orders are to keep it in lockdown and to avoid moving it as much as possible. End of story."

That wasn't good enough for Jazz or Thundercracker, who were both adamant about how dangerous and important the matter was.

"We never had a shard," Jazz said, insistently. "Not in our timeline, at least. Th' 'Cons never needed it. It doesn't matter if it's there or not. It's th' body that's th' problem."

The last few times the issue had come up, they'd said they would take Jazz and Thundercracker's
concerns into consideration and moved on to other issues. But last night Bumblebee had jumped into the fray, voicing his concern and backing them up. Lennox wasn't sure if his apprehension was based primarily on Sam's anxiety over the matter, or if there was more to it. But they weren't going to make any progress on the issue during that discussion, because Keller needed to be part of it. But Bumblebee and Jazz wouldn't leave the issue be. Lennox had wanted to bash his head into the wall as the mounting tension between NEST and the three concerned mechs had heightened. Optimus had finally called a halt to the argument around midnight with a promise of sitting down with Keller as soon as possible. That was the best they could do, though no one was really pleased with that solution.

Fortunately for Lennox, he was able to distance himself from the issue this morning. He still had the cloud of tension from the debate hovering in his mind, but for right now, he had other concerns. Better, happier ones.

Being located on a high tech military base in the US rather than in Afghanistan and having been promoted to Major both had immediate perks, such as a cell phone plan with unlimited nights and weekends and constant Internet access. He still didn't have time to open his video chat every day, but he generally managed to make time for a short conversation with Sarah at least twice or three times a week. Unfortunately, it was usually easiest to find time to call home at the end of his day, long after Annabelle was in bed. He had to work hard to find a time gap during the day, and even harder to find a spot to sit where aliens weren't walking around in plain sight. But he had learned to make good use of his time and the technology.

He texted his wife Sarah, with a request to get on Skype. It only took her about half an hour. Another huge advantage to being in the States, rather than Afghanistan, was the fact that she was only an hour behind him, at their home in El Paso. It certainly made it easier to coordinate these events on the fly, he thought, as he was greeted by the smiling faces of his two greatest loves, all thoughts of giant robots and aliens dissolving.

"Heeey," he began, grinning brightly. He sat up on the rec room couch and peered closer at the laptop screen. "Heya, baby girl!"

"Da-da!" Annabelle Lennox shrieked, ogling at the screen with joy. Lennox didn't think anything could make him smile more than that did.

"How's my princess?" he cooed, not caring if anyone overheard. He put the laptop on the coffee table and scooted closer to the screen, beaming. "How're my two favorite little ladies?"

Sarah smiled back at him with equal warmth. "We're all fine on the home front," she said, adjusting Annabelle in her arms. "Hi, baby."

Lennox stared back at her, trying to absorb every detail of her appearance into his memory, as he did every time he saw her. They'd been married almost twelve years now, and she was still as beautiful now as she had been the day he met her. "Hi," he said softly. He looked at their daughter. "Hey, hey, Annabelle, did you miss daddy?"

"Yea!" Annabelle cried, adamant. She waved her little doll at the screen, still ecstatic. "Da-da!"

Lennox laughed, his chest tight with pride and affection. Annabelle was growing up so fast, it was startling. He was missing so much, but to know she was doing well even without him... he had to be grateful for the minor miracles of her health and energy. She would be okay. He'd be back home, they'd be together, someday soon.

"How are things, Will?" Sarah asked, her eyes looking more concerned. "I missed hearing from you
last week. Texting isn't enough."

"I know, babe, I know," Lennox said, sighing. He traced an outline around Annabelle on the screen as she babbled like any other two-year old would. "I'm sorry. Work is nuts like you wouldn't believe."

Sarah hesitated. "...You're still in California, right?"

"Oh, yeah. No secret flights out anywhere, not yet," Lennox chuckled. "Sarah, believe me, if I could have you two stay here, I would. It's just..."

"Secret military agendas?" she guessed, smiling in jest.

Lennox chuckled. "More like property and technology concerns," he said, avoiding the tougher questions. He looked down at his daughter. "What did I miss, huh? Annabelle, can you tell me what you and mommy did this week?"

Familial bliss was rare in the military career field, even rarer for soldiers like him who had a job that required all of their time and, worse, required them to keep secrets from their loved ones. Lennox liked the Autobots, more and more as friends than as convenient allies. He enjoyed working for NEST. It was important; he was important. But every time he had a moment to sit talking with his wife like this, he remembered how lonely it was, for both of them.

He prayed, in secret, for Keller to finally convince the president to reveal the presence of the aliens. That way, he could maybe, maybe, bring his family closer to the base. He didn't want to try to get them here now, even as a perk of his rank, because Epps had a girlfriend, and all of the other soldiers had families to worry about, too. He couldn't be selfish, no matter how much it hurt.

He could have listened to Sarah talk about her part time job as a bank teller, the rodents that had invaded her garden, or Annabelle's successful potty training all day long. It never got boring, because he missed it, and for him, spending time with his family was better than any day on base, aliens or no.

"I wish you could be home," Sarah said quietly after a while. Annabelle was eating graham crackers enthusiastically, mashing them on her forehead and giggling madly. "Or that we were there with you."

Lennox sighed again. "I wish that, too," he said, wistful. "Oh, Sarah, I miss you so much." He peeked around her and smiled at their daughter. "You too, Annabelle. Daddy loves you so much."

"I love you," Sarah said, her tone and the emotion in her eyes telling Lennox she meant it fiercely. She was the bravest woman he had ever known.

"I love you, too, babe," Lennox said, smiling.

"Stay safe."

"I will."

He had to close the connection eventually. Sarah told him it was all right and that she understood. Annabelle waved goodbye, her cheerfulness heart-warming. Lennox waved goodbye and wished them a safe week. He prayed that next week, he'd be able to talk to them on their regularly scheduled day, without any interruptions.

He was tired of thinking about the future and all of its problems. He was tired of having to see his
family through a computer screen. William Lennox was just tired.

But when Ironhide walked by the rec room and waited patiently for Lennox to join him outside the human-sized doors, Lennox knew that it didn't matter if he was exhausted. He had a job to do, and he was going to do it well, for the sake of his family and the rest of their planet. It was the least he could do, really.

"Jazz wants to talk to us about some concerns he has with his group," Ironhide told him. He nodded at his fellow soldier. "I take it you have finished speaking with your wife?"

Lennox smiled at his closest alien friend and nodded. "Yup. Let's go."

For all of his thick-headedness, Ironhide could be just as intuitive as Prime or Ratchet when it came to human concerns. Maybe it was their age. "This won't last forever," the Autobot said wisely. "At least not for you."

That much Lennox was counting on. "Let's just hope the war ends soon for everyone," he replied. He patted Ironhide's leg as they walked down the hallway toward the command center. "Thanks, though, big guy."

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Kass hated politics. A lot. Even in their apocalyptic wasteland, she'd hated hearing about pre-war politics. It had always sounded like a bunch of five-year-olds arguing about sharing toys, honestly; all rubbish. Now, it was far more real for her, having to hear Jazz and Thundercracker explain their position in this world, but that didn't mean Kass had to like it.

It was complicated and scary. Kass didn't want to imagine being treated like anything other than what she was: a human being. She was British, born to British nationals somewhere in northern England, but did that matter in this world? No. Here, she was a waif, a nobody. She had faith in the Autobots to protect their ten, specifically the four humans, as they were a rather particular case. They weren't just border-hoppers. They were… time travelers. But it didn't make her feel like she mattered.

"Congratulations," Keller had told them sarcastically the first time he had managed to speak to them directly. "We'll probably have to open a whole new area of citizen registration for you."

That hadn't been comforting and Jazz had limited Keller's interaction with anyone but Thundercracker and himself after another ill-judged snark had made Danny cry and Wildrider snarl. Even knowing that Jazz liked and respected the man, and that Keller was simply venting his irritation at the whole situation, Kass had endured many sleepless nights worried about her fate and the fate of her friends, alien and human alike. They still faced a dark future, even if they had left the monsters behind.

But now that they were over the shock of their arrival here, and (although she hated to admit it) were starting to internalize the loss of Wheeljack, they were paying more attention to this new world they were in. And it turned out that politics were played over more than just citizenship requirements and VISAs. And that political games controlled more destinies than their own.

"Are they going to move the body or not?" Kass demanded that morning at breakfast. They had all heard about Barns' confrontation with Bumblebee, from Sam who had blurted it out when he escorted Barns back to Hangar B. The debate it had generated within their group was nothing compared to the heated dialogue between Bumblebee, Jazz and the NEST officials later that evening. It had been an argument really, and it was only through strenuous effort on the part of everyone involved that it hadn't devolved into name calling. They hadn't reached any conclusion last night, so
they were away again that morning. It was troubling.

"TC said Prime was thinking about it. It's really that old guy, Keller's, decision, because he's the one who talks to the President and the rest of the army," Rachel replied, shaking her head. They all had identical Styrofoam plates of eggs, bacon and toast. "It's a mess right now, so don't expect anything to happen soon. Those idiots."

"Why didn't they dump it in the Mariana, is what I want to know," Barns growled into his plate. He took a vicious bite of bacon before continuing. "It was foolish!"

"I heard Jazz saying it was because it was too close to our base on Guam, and they didn't want the Chinese to notice," Kass said with a sigh. "Since the Laurentian was closer and in friendly waters, they decided to just go with that."

Danny peered up, frowning. "What's the difference between them?"

Barns hesitated, not expecting her to have paid attention to the conversation, let alone ask a question. Secretly, he was pleased. "Well, for starters, the Mariana is deeper," he explained. "Much deeper. If they had dumped the remains there, they would have been crushed to very, very tiny pieces by the pressure of the water. And they would have been so deep that no living mechs could have retrieved them, even to try to put him back together. It would have been the perfect prison."

"But… the Laurentian isn't that deep, so no pressure," Danny concluded. For the first time in weeks, she looked curious about something. Kass smiled to herself.

"Well, not that much compared to the Challenger Deep, which is the deepest part of the Mariana Trench." Barns shook his head. "It was reckless to dump the bodies so quickly. They should have thought this out completely."

"Ah, politics," Rachel muttered. All of them nodded; politics were becoming their least favorite word collectively.

"I hope Jazz and TC get the Autobots to let us help out more. This place needs more help," Kass said, finishing her food. She sat back and looked at the door that led back to their hangar. "Just look at all the storage units. Are they just going to keep them here?"

"Well, they were talking about moving to three other bases eventually, when more mechs arrive, I think," Rachel replied. She rubbed her eyes tiredly. "I don't even know anymore."

They didn't want to think about the other bases, because even the refugees knew that if NEST had to split up, their ten would likely be separated as well. Kass' head ached just thinking about the havoc that would cause. She wouldn't go willingly, nor would her friends, but she doubted that mattered. They would go where NEST forced them to go, or else.

"I still can't believe they just left the body," Barns suddenly growled. He was still furious over it.

Rachel shrugged. "Well… we just have to deal with it, Barns. Prime's kind of an idiot, but not that much of one." For the blond, that was practically a compliment. Kass smiled.

"If they destroy the body, there is no Galvatron," Barns said, reasonable. He spoke through a mouthful of egg. "And if there is no Galvatron, then even if the Fallen mech appears, he will not have an army."

"Don't speak with your mouth full," Kass chided, which earned her a piece of toast flying by her head. "Hey!"
Rachel jabbed at her plate with her fork, a grim frown permanently in place. "That doesn't mean he won't have an army," she replied.

"Well, it would help," Barns said firmly.

"What if he doesn't exist in this world?" Kass wondered out loud, though she knew that was a weak hope. It would be better that he didn't, but… she didn't trust their luck. They had to be careful what they expected, or rather they had to be careful not to expect what they *hoped* would be real.

"What if he never existed at all?" Rachel asked, suddenly challenging. She waved her fork in the air, as if that explicated what she was saying. "No one saw him, well, other than a few dead mechs and maybe 'Rider that one time, but never for sure."

"I'd prefer him to be a bogeyman than real, but I don't know," Barns said, closing his eyes. "Someone resurrected Megatron. It makes sense it would be someone as mysterious as the Fallen was."

"Great. Demon robots," Rachel muttered into her cup of milk. "Just what we need."

Kass hummed and went back to her meal. She wouldn't try to pretend to understand what her friends were doing, with the politics or the military concerns, but she prayed they would do things for the better of everyone.

At least, she didn't care until later that afternoon.

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He was beginning to know the layout of the command center better than some of the NEST soldiers, Jazz thought, bemused. He spent so much time being debriefed or sharing intel with the Autobots, that he spent most of his day in there with at least two other officers. Thundercracker went with him most times, which helped. He disliked being in there only to argue with NEST over their next course of action. He knew they had to play it cool with their hosts, so he tried to avoid arguments.

After last night, Jazz hadn't been sure he wanted to be near the other Autobots, or they near him. They had unsuccessfully reached a standstill on the whole 'Megatron's body' thing. Keller was refusing to bring it up with the President, just because it was going to be hellish to drag the remains up completely, would require a large enough operation that it would likely attract attention from other countries and it would cost a lot. Lennox had argued, as Keller had in the previous two discussions, that the Abyss was so well guarded, they didn't need to move the body. Jazz disagreed, because that was the same line of thinking his NEST had followed back in his timeline, and look where *that* got them, but he might as well have been talking to a wall.

He'd been slightly concerned that this discussion would still be tainted by last night's argument. But he'd been wrong. It was refreshing to talk about non-future things and non-Megatron issues with the Autobot command plus Lennox. Jazz was more than happy to talk about the living conditions of the refugees at the moment and talk about how to improve certain things.

Then again, Jazz also had one more topic to bring up, and now was the perfect chance. He was going to bide his time carefully, however. Unlike Thundercracker who preferred to state things as they were, Jazz still remembered how to dance the dance of negotiations.

"…an' real beds somewhere for th' kids would be great, though I dunno what sort of supplies ya got on base anyway. Whatever ya use for the soldiers would be fine enough. I don't think any of them have ever slept on an actual bed b'fore, 'cept maybe Kass," he was saying to a mix of faces. Jazz
paused, considering. "Sam said he's headin' off t' college in a coupl'a weeks, an' it made m'think that th' kids should be allowed t'take some online courses this fall. It'd keep 'em occupied an' focused on somethin' new. Uh, I think that's it fer them. Us mechs are fine otherwise, honestly. Don't have a problem with th' energon, though I bet your Wheeljack is gonna be makin' that energon converter of his, so that'll make life a million times easier fer the military t' get us supplies. An' it tastes a heckuva lot better, too."

Ratchet turned and gave Jazz a wild look. "How—how did you know about the converter?" he sputtered.

Jazz had to smile. "What part of, *I used to hang out with Wheeljack fifty years in the future, don't ya understand? Besides, you took ours with all the supplies you took from Vortex, so give 'im that t' reference," he teased, though he tried to turn the conversation away from his dead friend. "Ha, it's okay. It's a good idea fer him t' make that, though, especially with so many of ya hanging around, including us. Trust me, it's gonna be needed."

"Well, I guess we will be supporting Wheeljack in that endeavor then," Optimus said, bemused. He looked down at the silver mech. "Is that all you wished to discuss, Jazz?"

That was an opening for broaching the other topic he had left to bring up, but Jazz was still unsure how the Autobots would take it. Then again, he'd never know if he didn't try. "Well..." he began, glancing over at Thundercracker before continuing, "we were thinkin'."

"About?" Ratchet prompted, impatient.

Jazz sighed. "We've been here a'most three weeks now. Y'all have been good t' us, fer sure. I can't thank ya enough." He fidgeted, aiming to sound undemanding. "I feel bad askin' fer more, but last night, th' mechs in our group sat down t' discuss some issues."

There was a pause. "...Yes?" Optimus asked, unsure of where Jazz was going.

"What I'm tryin' t'say is that, while *I'd* be content with waiting this out t' calmer seas," Jazz began, wary of how to say this, "some of my guys are gettin' antsy. They want this trust thing t' be a two-way street now, ya see."

"Excuse me?" Lennox immediately blurted from above. He sounded incredulous.

"Don't get yer pants in a bunch, Will," Jazz said, chuckling. He looked back at Optimus and tilted his head. "Vortex had a good point though. Y'all are talkin' so much about us earnin' trust an' stuff, but all yer lettin' us do is sit around in th' hangar. I'm thinkin' maybe its time we, ya know, had a bigger ball t' play with."

Optimus hesitated, considering what the other mech had just said. "You want more responsibilities?" he concluded.

"Yeah, I guess," Jazz said, shrugging. "Just enough that my mechs don't kill any of ya, or each other, out of th' sheer insanity that sitting around is drivin' us to." He grinned, trying to ignore the glare Ironhide was sending him. "Now, I'm not sayin' ya immediately put Wildrider in charg'a ultra-secret communications er anythin'. I mean, maybe we can help with liftin' supplies, or movin' stuff. If ya turn Vortex's flight mod back on, Ratch, I'm sure he'd be a great help transportin' stuff."

"Maybe," Ratchet agreed, reluctantly. He looked back and forth between Ironhide and Prime. "We'll have to discuss this."

Window of opportunity closing fast, Jazz decided to go for the kill. "An'... well..." he continued.
"Some of our more pessimistic members, includin' me, were thinkin' about longer term issues, an' well, we're a bit nervous about not havin' our weapons."

That got the reaction he had expected earlier. "WHAT?" Ironhide and Lennox both yelled out at the same time.

Jazz winced. "Hey, hey, lemme finish, guys," he said, trying to cut off their expectedly angry responses. "I'm not askin' fer much. Maybe just me an' TC at first. Test th' trust ya have in us t' behave."

"Why would you need them?" Optimus asked, bewildered.

"Protection, obviously," Thundercracker suddenly said, speaking up for the first time since they'd arrived that morning. He frowned deeply, unafraid of being blunt in front of Prime or the others. "From you, maybe not. But you are not the only threat out there, Autobots."

"You expect us to trust you with weapons? In our own base?" Prowl asked, frowning. He didn't share Ironhide's anger, though he looked more suspicious than Prime did.

Jazz shook his helm. "While bein' armed t' th' teeth again would be lovely for my nerves, I ain't askin' fer a plasma cannon, a'ight?"

"I am," Thundercracker interrupted, not caring for being politically correct. Jazz glared at him.

"We'll take baby steps," Jazz added quickly. "As many of them as ya want, Prime. I don't want t' be stuck as a refugee forever. I want t' help y'all."

"But not be an Autobot," Lennox said, frowning.

"Not… yet," Jazz replied, awkward. He gave the human a pleading look, hoping to use his jokes to win them over. "Aw, come on, Lennox, yer second amendment grants people th' right t' hold weapons. I'm a person."

"You're an alien," he shot back, unimpressed. Ah, the wonders of semantics. "And while I might advocate that Amendment myself, it's like Keller said before. We don't have an alien bill of rights yet."

Thundercracker rumbled lowly. "And what if we need to defend ourselves?" he challenged. He looked over at Optimus specifically. "Be it from an Autobot who doesn't follow your orders not to attack one of us, or even from Starscream, should he reappear, we should have something."

Optimus shook his head. "I don't see the need to arm any of you now. This is a secure compound and we have not seen or heard from the Decepticons in some time."

"Even younglings are given weapons in times of war," Thundercracker countered, glaring. Optimus stared back, unimpressed.

He had one last ace, though Jazz didn't want to bring it up in case it backfired. He didn't have much of a choice now. He gestured behind them at the door.

"If yer so worried about us actin' out, ya obviously haven't been lookin' at us very close," he began, grave. "Wildrider's at 'is most dangerous when transformed an' ya haven't locked him down. Arcee could outmaneuver any of ya an' she's been left alone. Slag, look at what Vortex could do with his propellers. I'm surprised ya never amputated them offa him after his an' Ironhide's scuffle."
"I was tempted, believe me," Ratchet groused darkly.

"Well, ya didn't. An' we haven't budged an' we've been good little mechs," Jazz said finally. He crossed his arms for good measure. "We ain't stupid. We ain't runnin'. We ain't turnin' on th' only people on this planet that'll show us good will, so come on. Yer askin' us t' trust ya, but ya ain't trustin' us with anythin'. If yer serious about not seein' us as enemies, ya should prove it."

There was a longer pause and Jazz stared at each of his former co-workers with a calm expression, though he was nervous about where this would lead them. He hoped they wouldn't just turn around and act on the issues he just pointed out, but he had to trust they would be kind, as well as smart.

Optimus obviously referred back and forth between his officers, but eventually, he looked back at Jazz with a neutral expression. Jazz smiled hopefully.

"...You have made a point, Jazz," Prime finally said, slowly. "I am not sure how this would work yet. Maybe you and Thundercracker both should be allowed to demonstrate how you can behave professionally while armed." He looked up at Lennox, who looked incredibly displeased by this. "We will have to discuss it further."

"Of course," Jazz said, feeling triumphant. "Thanks, Prime. I won't let ya down." He elbowed the jet next to him. "An' neither will this guy, right?"

"Because I have a desire to get slagged," Thundercracker said sarcastically, shaking his helm.

Jazz grinned. "Right." Maybe this would work out.

Lennox ran a hand over his face. "Keller is going to have kittens," he muttered. Ironhide turned and gave him a sharp look, but Lennox quickly waved him away. "Shut up, it was an expression."

The dark weapons specialist snorted. "Human language leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to sounding intelligent—," he started to complain.

A sharp, wailing sound rang out overhead, causing Lennox to jump and the Autobots to look up in alarm. Jazz froze, unsure of what the alarm call was for. Judging by the NEST official's expressions, nothing good.

"Several unidentified alien signatures were just spotted in airspace over the Arctic Circle," Prowl suddenly stated. He whirled around and gave Optimus a frantic look. "Prime, they are Decepticon signatures, and they are on course for Greenland."

Greenland? Jazz froze and stared up at Optimus, a building feeling of horror in his chestplates. That sounded familiar. Too familiar.

Lennox practically flew down the catwalk stairs, the Major taking command effectively. "Follow me to communications," he barked out at the Autobot officers. "If this is real, we're getting on NEST-1 in the next six minutes, so MOVE!"

Jazz pressed back against the wall as everyone hurried to figure out what was happening. He was trying to stop overwhelming feelings of déjà vu and other darker emotions that threatened to throw his processors into havoc.

"Perhaps you will be getting your weapons sooner than you had hoped, Jazz," Prowl murmured, stalking out of the command room, door wings high on his back in agitation.

Beside him, Thundercracker turned and gave Jazz a wary look. Both mechs stared at one another,
and even as Jazz tried desperately to keep calm, he knew exactly what the jet was thinking… because he was thinking the same thing.

Oh, Primus—please don't be the same.

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End Chapter 16.

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A/Ns:
-Bay/Keller got it completely wrong in Transformers (2007) about the Laurentian Abyss being the deepest place on the planet. Challenger Deep, in the Mariana Trench, is the deepest place. (I remember raging in the theatre when they said it was the Laurentian haha.) So pardon the explanation here; I had to tidy up the error a bit. Their mistake actually works for this story, strangely enough, as you will soon see.

-For non-Americans: the Second Amendment to our constitution grants all citizens the right to bear/own weapons. I myself have a battle axe! Yep. It's a family hobby, honest…
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Something was wrong.

Something was very, very wrong.

Kass noticed first how quickly the NEST soldiers were moving. The Autobots were out of sight, mostly, and Jazz and Thundercracker hadn't returned yet. The first fear she had was that perhaps one of them had finally snapped and reacted violently to the goading of one of the more immature Autobots.

But then she saw the military vehicles moving. She heard them talking about getting a plane ready. One after another, several helicopters landed, throwing up dirt and dust, loading people and equipment and then leaving, flying northeast. She saw the Autobot twins, Sunstreaker and Sideswipe, allow themselves to be secured in webbing by the humans and airlifted away by the helicopters. Then she saw Ratchet, Ironhide and finally Optimus Prime do the same. This wasn't about something happening on base.

Bluestreak was tense as they sat with the others and watched the movement with wary eyes and optics. The air was charged with a tension they hadn't felt, well, since they had fallen into this new world.

"What's going on?" Kass asked out loud.

The gunner shook his helm. "I don't know," he said. He paused. "Jazz just pinged me. He said…"

The mech stopped and seemed surprised over something. Everyone looked at him expectantly, though Kass was wary about what he was going to say next. She doubted it was good news.

"He said this world's Wheeljack just gave TC and him their weapons back," Bluestreak said, green optics huge.

Kass stared at him and then looked at their other friends. Barns looked sick and Wildrider's engines started up sharply. Even Danny was looking alert.

Slowly, Kass looked back out at the hangar bay door and into the airfield beyond, watching the last helicopter disappear into the distance.

They waited… for whatever was coming next.

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AFSPC had detected two unidentified objects descending into atmosphere over the North Pole, flying towards Greenland. Lennox had made the call—it wasn't just the danger posed by Megatron's corpse on the Atlantic seafloor they had to be concerned over. NEST had too many potential targets on the east coast to just ignore the incursion.

He immediately requested clearance to take a team to St. John's or to divert to another location if necessary. While he had Epps working to get the choppers loaded and their equipment transferred to Amedee, he and Optimus were evaluating all possible targets. Within 30 minutes after Keller gave them clearance from SECAF, NEST-1 took to the air with two Raptors as escorts.

Best-case scenario was that these incoming signals were ordinary Decepticons sent down on a scouting mission; Lennox grimaced at the thought that that was the best-case scenario. In his head, worst case ranged from an attack on an East Coast target—say Washington or New York—to two Decepticons with a plan headed straight for the one place on Earth they could not be allowed to go: the Abyss. Based on the trajectory of the bogies, he was convinced it was the latter.

They could not afford to make any mistakes now, not at this juncture. They had to investigate and be prepared for a firefight over Megatron's corpse. Or, just a firefight. Lennox knew it was a sad, sad day that he was hoping it would just be an ordinary fight with rogue aliens and nothing more sinister than that.

Two hours into the flight, they'd heard from AFSPC that the bogies had "disappeared" somewhere over Greenland. He'd requested UAV coverage of southern Greenland, Newfoundland and the Grand Banks, and the drones had been dispatched. But everything had been quiet since then. Too quiet. As they passed into Canadian air space and lined up with the tanker that would refuel them midair, he worried.

"We've entered Canadian air space," he called out. He turned and looked at his team. "Alright, this is getting to crunch time, guys."

The row of five Autobots, all strapped down in their alt forms, took up the back of the cargo area. Lennox hated that they had to travel like that—he really felt that it must be incredibly claustrophobic for the 'Bots. Ironhide, who was closest to the humans, made a low rumble.

"We can't fight if we're up the air," he said, irritable.

"We're aiming to land in CFS St. John's, to rendezvous with the Canadian Navy," Lennox told him, trying to placate his impatience. "Thank God Keller already had NATO in on this. We should be touching down in another couple of hours."

"Major," someone called out behind him, catching his attention. "Rear Admiral Jacobs on line from St. John's."

Lennox leaned over the telecommunications desk and nodded for the call to be put on speaker. "Rear Admiral Jacobs?" he asked. "This is Major Lennox from NEST."

"Lennox, I hear good things about you," Jacobs said through the speakers. He sounded older, but far more pleasant than Lennox was feeling at the moment. "We have two vamps on radar more than seven klicks north. We originally thought they were meteors, but I've never seen meteorites change direction when sighted."
Lennox frowned. "Definitely 'Cons, then, because friendlies would have called in already. SecDef issued a strike order on any non-responding alien craft or life forms. If you'll send us their heading, we'll get our UAVs on it."

"Glad we're on the same page then, Major," Jacobs replied. "The security net around the Abyss has been increased. The USS John C. Stennis already has the area under surveillance, and I have two frigates and a destroyer on the way to join her."

Epps made a strangled sound somewhere behind him. "An aircraft carrier?" he whispered, probably to Ironhide. "I forgot it was there."

"Rear Admiral, pass on the message to the Stennis that our enemies have heavy weaponry," Lennox said, focusing on the hull of the aircraft they were in instead of thinking about how freaking dangerous it was to leave such a valuable ship in the way of potential Decepticons. "They can tear the ship up damn good with only the two inbound." It had only taken one to eliminate most of the air support they'd had at Mission City.

"Noted and already passed on," Jacobs said. "I'm working on mobilizing the RCAF right now, but I suspect we'll need your air support as well, Major."

"I agree." Lennox rubbed his eyes, forcing his exhaustion back. "I'll contact the Air Force immediately. We'll be landing in St. John's in just over two hours."

"Acknowledged." Jacobs chuckled. "Don't hesitate to hurry up, Major. If we have a problem, we're going to need the support."

"Don't worry," Lennox replied. "We'll be there."

The nervous feeling in his gut didn't go away as he spoke with Keller to arrange for F16s to be sent north from Andrews to provide air support at the border.

"I'll get in contact with the Stennis," Keller said and then abruptly ended the call with, "I'll get back to you Lennox."

Lennox didn't mind the abrupt dismissal—he was focusing on the thought of the Stennis when he pulled away from the desk. Whatever happened, they had to make sure to keep the action away from the Abyss.

"We're a about an hour and a half out. The Canadians have the trail of the bogies, and they are definitely headed for the Labrador coast. The Stennis should have attack fighters up in the air already, but Keller is arranging for additional air support," he said, looking at the Autobots specifically. "We're going to go to the coast and see what we can do from there. The good news is that if you guys can't get to the area over the water, the grounder Decepticons can't either. If there are any, well, you know what to do."

"Why not just drop us on the aircraft carrier?" Ironhide asked, impatient as always when it came to fighting.

"And make that the bigger target?" Epps asked. He laughed. "Yeah, sure, right. I might not like the aliens-shooting-at-me part of my job, but I do want to keep my job, okay?"

"Oh, goodie, then we're the bait this time," Sideswipe said. Being stuck in vehicle mode, his voice carried enough emotion to make up for the lack of having a face. "Hey, Ratch, how difficult would it be to make an aquatic mod?"
Ratchet growled lowly. "Go bug Wheeljack for that. I'm not going to be responsible for you getting stuck on the ocean floor," he replied. "This planet has too much slagging water! It'd be one thing if it were all solid, but no!"

Sideswipe rocked on his wheels, sounding far too amused for the situation. "Hey, it's not like I can drown," he pointed out.

"Shut it," both Ratchet and Sunstreaker said in mirrored irritation. Lennox sighed, then turned back to take an incoming call.

"There are Decepticons at Thule," Keller said, without preamble.

Lennox stared stupidly at the console. "Thule?" he repeated, as Epps leapt to bring up the relevant information on a remote US airfield in Greenland.

Keller did not sound happy, but the general in him was shining as he spoke briskly and to the point. "At least two. They attacked the base three hours ago," he said. "Hit them so hard and so fast that communications were knocked out completely. Apparently the 821 fought back pretty hard, and managed to take one of them down. Drove them off. They managed to get the old Telex system back up and running again to let us know."

The Decepticons were trying to divert their attentions with multiple attacks now. There was nothing at Thule that they could gain from, so it had to be a distraction. "They don't know how many more bogies may have come down while they were under attack though," Keller continued, with a heavy sigh. "The Danish Ministry of Defense is dispatching Coast Guard and Air Force support groups to help our troops. Should I tell them to expect you?"

Lennox was silent, trying to think of the ramifications of this information. The Thule Air Base provided space surveillance information and ballistic missile warning for the North Atlantic, but surely that couldn't have been it. The Decepticons must have known they were making enough havoc to be noticed. They wanted the attention. Why?

"We'll continue on to St. John's," Lennox finally said, firm. "There's nothing we can do to help in Greenland, and that might have been intended to divert our attention away from the coast. And we know at least two are on the way south."

Keller agreed. "The Stennis is on Alert 5, and they have visual contact with the RCN vessels."

"Clearly, the Decepticons are planning to bring down additional troops," Optimus said when Lennox turned back to them.

"Yeah," Lennox said, nodding. He fought the urge to panic over the idea they were facing multiple points of attack. "We can cover most of the same area with other AFSPC surveillance locations, but we will have less time to react."

All of the Autobots were silent. A ping from the command deck indicated they would be touching down shortly.

"Everyone get ready for immediate drop off," Lennox said. "We'll be on the ground in 22 minutes."

But then one of the tactics officers manning the radar spoke up and caught all of their attention.

"Two vamps inbound!" he called out.
"Here we go," Sideswipe muttered darkly. Lennox buckled himself into his seat and focused on the radar, trying not to feel as pessimistic.

"Raptors, you are free to engage," the Major ordered, the order being echoed by the transmitter and he prayed.

Their escorts complied and Lennox braced himself for the wait. All they knew was that the Decepticons were fliers; Optimus had been wary of more Seekers arriving and he knew from personal experience that anything even remotely resembling Starscream's speed and agility would be dangerous.

Through the sound of their own aircraft's mechanical cacophony of noises, Lennox heard the scream of a Raptor diving through the air, but then that faded. He couldn't hear explosions, though he could hear muted voices coming in from the tactics officer's headphones as the Raptor pilots on their side reported back.

"Bandit one is down," the tactics officer stated. "Bandit two—oh, shit."

Lennox gripped the arm of his seat and waited. He could almost hear his own heartbeat, then his ears popped as NEST-1 began its descent. Behind him, the Autobots seemed to loom in silence as they waited for news as well.

The soldier suddenly spoke up, saying with dread, "Both Raptors down. Bandit Two is—" The officer stopped and moved backwards, shocked. The radar in front of him was frighteningly blank. "Where did he go?"

"Oh, hell…" Epps muttered, looking up at the ceiling.

_Both Raptors down_. Lennox turned and stared up too, as if he could see their enemy. The silence that rang overhead was stifling. There was only the creaking of the aircraft and its engines to be heard. The pilot and copilot were talking rapidly as they readied the plane for landing. Lennox braced himself, waiting for some other sign they weren't alone in the skies.

"Is this a bad time to mention I get air sick?" Sideswipe quipped as the lights dimmed, the mechs' headlights the brightest source of light now.

Sunstreaker growled lowly at his brother. "I hate you."

Epps looked back at Lennox, alarmed. "Where the hell did the Decepticons go?"

"Wait," the tactics officer interrupted again. He looked back at Lennox, wary. "Sir, we're being hailed by the Stennis' CDC."

Instantly, all fear of being attacked in the air was replaced by what sort of message the carrier had to give them. They wouldn't be contacting the secret C-5 plane unless they absolutely had to. He nodded to accept the call, heart racing.

"—This is the USS John C. Stennis," the tactics officer on the other end of the line stated. He sounded rushed, almost afraid. "We are under enemy fire, I repeat, we are under enemy fire and require immediate air support."

"What the—," Lennox started, but stopped himself. He leaned closer to the mic. "This is Major Lennox on board NEST-1. What's going on?"

"We are under attack by two unidentified Raptors, four unknown machines," the tactics officer was
saying, "I repeat, send air support—"

Epps caught Lennox's eye and looked ill. "What are they talking about? They have at least a seventy jets on board—"

"—I repeat, we are under fire!" the man was screaming now over the intercom. Decorum went out the window and was replaced with panic. "Oh, God, there's another one. Where are they coming fro —"

The line went dead sharply and Lennox's heart leaped up to his throat.

"Contact SECAF, now!" Lennox shouted, turning to several of his communications officers. This couldn't happen. "We need air support. We cannot lose the Stennis! Someone get the RCN on the horn and find out what is going on! And where are those UAVs?"

Images of Mission City and how easily just one Seeker could destroy five or more Raptors in midair flashed before Lennox's eyes. He didn't want to imagine what seven Decepticons could do to a ship that expensive or open in the water. Aircraft carriers rarely took positions away from their battle groups—they were not heavily armored and didn't have many weapons aside from the aircraft they could launch. He was sure someone had thought that a full battle group would attract too much attention, but now it was needed.

"Did all seven Decepticons arrive today, when Thule was attacked? !" Optimus asked, his voice harsh over the din of soldiers relaying commands and Epps sending out the request to SECAF.

"They're not all fliers," Epps said suddenly, hearing something over the radio again with his own headphones on. "What the hell—did they just—they came out of the water! How did they get there? Did they fly down in their protoforms?"

"They'd have to be mad," Ratchet hissed. Kamikaze bombers rose to mind for Lennox when he thought about just how nuts it was. But the Decepticons weren't exactly known to be sane, he reasoned.

"I have no idea what's going on!" he snapped. He pointed at the closest lieutenant. "Kane! Get Jacobs back on line. We need NATO to—"

One of the tactics officers who hadn't spoken before turned, her eyes filled with alarm. All at once… things got so much worse.

"Sir, the Plumas base is under attack!"

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Plumas National Park
NEST Base

An explosion ripped across the vastness of the airfield and Rachel knew they were screwed even before the warning sirens went off.

They had no weapons, at least their ten didn't. Jazz and Thundercracker had gone off with Prowl to talk about whatever mess had happened earlier to cause all of the chaos with the soldiers. When they had first arrived, Rachel's own weapons and flight suit had been taken somewhere "secure." They had confiscated all of the weapons off of the mechs, too. Essentially, they were left to believe that the NEST soldiers and Autobots would be able to protect them if they ended up needing help.
Unsurprisingly, Rachel was not comforted in the least.

"What the bloody hell was that?" Kass exclaimed, following Rachel as she edged closer to the front of the hangar. The screeching alarm overhead made it difficult to hear, but Rachel recognized the telltale sounds of gunfire and the occasional explosion from outside.

"Keep everyone together!" she called back. Bluestreak and Arcee were following, while Vortex and Wildrider had already rushed out of the hangar. Rachel wanted to follow them to find out what was happening. She could hear men shouting.

They had to assemble and get out. Or get out and wait for everyone to meet up. The forest would be safest. If they could just get past the gate, they'd be okay. She hoped Jazz and Thundercracker weren't near the main source of the action; they had better be on their way back there to find them.

"We should go the other way, toward the back," Barns called out, walking with Danny hurriedly from behind. "Rachel, don't go out there until we know what's happening!"

"I'll go look first," Bluestreak added, walking faster.

Rachel nodded and glanced around warily from the end of the last row of crates. The huge hangar door stood open with a mockingly beautiful sunset beyond it.

Suddenly, one of the largest containers on base, a long red one full of the pseudo-energon, was thrown across their line of vision. Rachel gasped and ducked as it slammed into a line of vehicles on the tarmac and went off in a bright, unexpected explosion. Bluestreak yelled and dashed forward, ignoring Kass's scream.

"Stop the fire, before it spreads!" she heard someone shout, probably Barns. He was right. They were right next to three more crates full of the stuff. If they all went off, the whole base could be wiped off the map. She and her friends would certainly be killed.

Rachel spun around to see past the flames and tried to see where the canister had come from—

And then the sound of a human screaming told her she didn't have to look far.

"RUN! RUN AWAY! HEY!"

The scream, hoarse, and entirely emasculate, could belong to only one person on base. Rachel turned and saw Sam Witwicky running full speed toward them, Mikaela Banes in tow. Despite looking like a sharp wind might blow her over, Mikaela easily kept up with Sam as they ignored the fires in front of the hangar and headed straight for their group. Behind them ran another NEST soldier, his useless M16 clutched to his chest. He looked dreadfully out of his element, even more than Sam or Mikaela did.

"What's going on? !" Barns demanded, wide eyed as Sam tried and nearly failed to skid to a stop in front of them.

"Decepticons!" Sam gasped, frantic. "Holy shit—there's three of them and we have to—Bumblebee said to get you and then—"

Arcee gasped and rolled forward in a defensive motion as a sharp screech went out over the air. It was so inhuman that it sent a shiver up Rachel's spine. The noise belonged to something worse than an exploding canister. A silver plated beast, one with wings, came flying down out of nowhere straight toward them. Rachel went to grab Danny out of the way, being closest to her, but Bluestreak beat her to it.
Screeching back in Cybertronian, Bluestreak reappeared at the front of the gate and jumped. Being so bulky, none of the mechs could jump very high, but his hands latched onto the attacking mini-robot with ease. The Decepticon shrieked and Bluestreak threw it hard in the other direction when the creature clawed at his hand. Bluestreak didn't give up, however, and immediately chased after the bird-like thing when it shot out of sight.

"Bluestreak!" Kass screamed and went to run after him. Barns grabbed her arm and held her back, though.

"Don't follow! He can handle it!" he said. He looked back at the hangar, the heat from the fire causing sweat to drip down his brow. Rachel's own shirt was soaked. "Merde. All right, we need to get out of here."

The NEST soldier with them gestured hurriedly behind them, "To the back, to the doors—!

Without warning, another explosion made them jump. Rachel didn't think things could possibly get worse. But they always did. She heard the mech's footsteps before she saw him. That didn't make seeing him any better, however.

He was enormous—one of the largest mechs Rachel had ever seen, outside of Thundercracker and Prime. This one, all bright silver, took several heavy steps forward, with his bulk practically tangible all around his frame. His red visor was narrowed with precision in mind and the purple icons of the Unmaker stood out clearly on his shoulders and chestplate as he turned toward the hangar.

Rachel forgot how to breathe for several moments.

The Decepticon was not alone. More of those creepy smaller mechs were clinging to him now, chattering and making mechanical noises that were probably language. Behind her, Kass gasped.

"What the hell is that?" Rachel asked, voice sharper to her ears than she had expected.

She jumped when Arcee rolled up beside the humans, radiating aggression.

"Soundwave—he is controlling the symbiotes!" the Autobot exclaimed. She froze just as the giant Decepticon turned and saw her with the humans. She didn't have weapons to transform, but that had never stopped any of them before. "Everyone—RUN!"

The symbiotes, as they were called, screeched and flung themselves off of their master as Soundwave opened fire on Arcee. Rachel didn't have the time to worry about the pink Autobot; she felt fire tickle the back of her legs and she tried to outpace the explosive power of the missiles. She flew to the side, sliding straight across the cement floor. She heard people shouting and she fearfully wondered where her human friends had gone.

One of the soldiers opened fire above her, but another flying symbiote swung down and grabbed him by the neck, hauling him straight into the air. His gun hit the ground, only feet away. Rachel scrambled to her knees and set her eyes on the weapon.

Rachel dove and grabbed the gun at the same moment the symbiote spun around. It fired, but she was already sliding behind one of the container units, right in front of Sam and Mikaela. Sam sent her a wild look.

"Do you know how to use that thing?" he squeaked.

Whipping the outdated M16 the proper way around, Rachel snarled. "Some of us didn't have fucking video games to play with while growing up," she shot back. She pointed the gun at the end of the
container, heart racing. "Shut up and start moving back toward the back of the hangar, now!"

There were only normal bullets in the gun, she was sure, and normal metal bullets didn't do shit on Cybertronian plating. However, she could aim, and if she got the symbiote or Soundwave in an optic or under plating, it could be useful. She scrambled backwards to her feet, eyes on the end of the crate as she followed Sam and Mikaela down toward the other end.

Inwardly, she hoped Jazz or Thundercracker would get their afts back there.

It was a small mercy to see Arcee fly by alive, her speed her only defense, as Soundwave launched an impressive assault. Rachel cursed as the smoke that resulted from it blocked her view. She had to find her three human friends and make sure they got out okay. She hoped they had the sense not to stay put—

Through the smoke, Rachel saw a red visor pierce through it effortlessly. If it landed on her, she didn't know. All she could acknowledge was the fact that she was staring down yet another soulless red optic and she was alone and she absolutely refused to fucking die here—

She turned around completely and ran. She was only a few yards behind Sam and Mikaela and they had a clear shot for the crates lining the back of the hangar. From there, they could go through the hallway and get outside. The trees were the best cover they had, so they had to risk the open airfield to get to the edge of the forest.

Rachel gasped loudly when Sam slipped and nearly took Mikaela down with him. He did so because of the flying symbiote that appeared in the air over them out of no where. Rachel brought her gun up, praying it would do at least minor damage—

"GET DOWN!"

Rachel immediately dropped at the command; it was a familiar one, spoken by a familiar voice. Jazz flew overhead, newly reinstalled cannons roaring. She rolled to the side quickly and looked up as the silver Autobot hit the symbiote hard with two plasma blasts. Jazz looked better than ever now, gleaming with health; he clearly had no problem stomping down on its back and with one hand ripping its spine out by the head.

Yeah, she liked having big friends.

Jazz turned and fired three more times out the hangar door, aiming at something she couldn't see. Maybe it was Soundwave, or in a worst-case scenario, more Decepticons. He did turn around, though, and looked ready to chase after his target. The threat was moving away from them. Bluestreak stood by with Thundercracker, but nodded to Jazz at some unheard direction and went after the fleeing Decepticon.

"Go with TC!" Jazz shouted, to all of the humans by the crates. Rachel opened her mouth to protest, but he knew her too well. "Rachel, you don't have weapons that will work on these guys! Do what you can to protect the civilians!"

A menial task meant for menial hands. Rachel gritted her teeth and nodded, rushing back to where the others had run after the giant Seeker, who was acting as a shield as they went by the open hangar bay door. Arcee was out of sight again and Rachel was grateful to see Kass, Barns and Danny already rushing after Thundercracker. The wailing sirens were new, but the running away wasn't.

Their Hell had followed them, she realized, over the sound of her roaring blood and pounding heart.

All at once, they were home again, as the screeching and firing started up once more.
They got as far as the middle of the field when Thundercracker stopped and then they kept running. Rachel had time to catch her breath and listen to one soldier's shout across the field.

"He's got the Shard!"

Onboard NEST-1
Over the Gulf of St. Lawrence

It was rather spectacular, Optimus Prime realized, how quickly their interlude of peace had been shattered—first by the arrival of the time-travelers, and now by a well-planned Decepticon plot.

It was also their worst nightmare. And it was getting worse by the second.

"More Decepticons inbound," Lennox announced from the radar platform. "What the hell is SecDef doing about that air support? They've had an hour. We need Eagles in here ASAP." When the Stennis had been attacked, Lennox had ordered NEST-1 to change course, so they could get close enough to see the situation, guide their forces in support.


Optimus couldn't believe that they had let this happen. Contact with Bumblebee had been cut short, but from what it sounded like, Soundwave had landed in California. Communication with the base wouldn't last with him there blocking it, and neither would their remaining security forces there. Soundwave was far too strong.

The shard had been as secure as the United States government had wanted it to be, at least while the Autobots were onsite. Nothing could be completely secured against Soundwave, but in retrospect they could have done much more to keep it safe. Keller hadn't listened to them about the shard. He hadn't listened to them about Megatron's remains and he himself hadn't forced the issue. Now, they would all have to pay the consequences of their malfeasance.

There wasn't time to blame any person or agency, however. They were in a battle now, despite the Autobots now being unable to do anything but wait and watch as their allies attempted to ward off enemies they couldn't hope to defeat alone.

::We should be down there!:: Ironhide was swearing. He was physically trembling from restraint.

::And do what? Fight them over the water? Fight them on the human ship, with humans underfoot?: Ratchet challenged. ::Use your head. We can't fight them like this!::

::Then they should bring them to land,:: Ironhide snarled. ::And then we'll deal with them right::.:

Optimus didn't want to point out the grim fact that distracting the Decepticons at this point would be impossible. They had their goal right before them; it was practically touchable. He prayed they could get air support there before their enemies accomplished their goal.

If Jazz were here, he'd most likely be telling them, "I told you so."

"Oh, hell…" someone said, startling him out of his thoughts.

His sensors sought the origin out and saw Epps looming over his radio, headphones on, but he was also looking at the screen that the Predators' video feed was being linked to. Something about Epps' posture and voice alarmed Prime greatly.
"It's the mech," Epps stated. He sounded as if he were being strangled as his voice rose in volume. "It's the mech! PRIME! IT'S THE MECH!"

Optimus surged forward on his wheels and his entire frame twitched as he fought the urge to break the straps holding him down, transform. "What mech?" he demanded.

"The mech on fire!" the Chief Master Sergeant said. "The Fallen's here! The Fallen is h—!"

All at once, two of the other tactics officers shouted and Epps made a horrible gasping sound over something happening on his screen. It was at an angle that made it impossible for the transformed mechs to glimpse at, but the human's reaction made it clear whatever was on the screen wasn't good.

"They're—they're ripping the Stennis apart. Holy crap, oh my God, what is that thing? !" Epps was ranting. Whatever he was seeing on the screen was causing him to panic and that made Optimus even more alarmed. His own sensors were picking up Decepticon beacons nearby, but that meant little. "That's not a mech. That can't be a freakin' mech!"

"What is going on?" Optimus demanded. There had to be something they could do. NEST had been created for this purpose, to defend against Decepticon assault.

What little they could do in the air was about the same they could do all the way on land and all of them knew it. Sunstreaker's engines revved and Optimus knew that if they were any closer to the action, Ironhide probably would have found a way to jump out of the C-5. There was nothing they could do.

After watching his screen with increasing horror, Epps finally stood back and looked up at Lennox. Optimus had never seen either of his human friends look so upset.

"…The Stennis is incapacitated," Epps finally managed to say, eyes wide. "Those… the one on fire… he just decimated it. Ripped through it like it was tinfoil."

"Holy Primus," Ratchet whispered, horrified.

With a muted cry of anger, Lennox whirled around. "Where is the Goddamn air force? !" he screamed.

Optimus fought the urge to just transform and jump out the back of the plane, policies be damned. "Let us out now," he said. "We have to get down there!"

"It's miles of open ocean, Prime, we can't just drop you!" the blond soldier replied. He gripped the side of his head, frustration boiling over. "Goddamn it. Goddamn it!"

"He's come for the body," Ratchet said quietly to Optimus. "This was more than a trap to attack the base, Prime. Even if this hadn't split the team up, there's nothing we can do to stop them from retrieving the remains."

Hearing that out loud just made their failure more painful to realize. This could have been avoided months ago, if they had just done what had needed to be done. All Optimus could think of now were the stories Jazz and his group had brought with them, of a world where this exact situation had played out. As a result, their world had been lost, devastated and destroyed. Now… it wasn't hard to imagine their nightmare becoming this world's reality.

"We have to get out of air space, Will!" Epps suddenly said, gesturing at the radar. "We're sitting ducks up here!"
There was more to lose than the aircraft carrier. Optimus hated himself for having come now, knowing that the trip had been in vain, that they had failed even before they'd left.

There was nothing they could do to fix this. Lennox ran a hand through his hair and his expression mirrored the frustration and anxiety Optimus was feeling as well.

"Turn back to St. John's," Lennox ordered. They were already terribly off course in their attempt to figure out what was happening.

Sunstreaker cursed loudly. "We're fragging useless up here!" he finally yelled out. All of his team were overwhelmed by their own helplessness. Optimus could barely believe any of this was actually happening.

"Well, unless you've developed aquatic abilities, we're all useless," Lennox said, glaring at him.

"Not true," Epps suddenly spoke up. He shook his head slowly as he stared at his screen. "You can start praying, 'cause RCN reports that there're several objects ascending to the surface."

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End Chapter 17.

A/NS:
-Fun fact: The Laurentian Abyss doesn't exist. The closest Shantastic's awesome research could come to it was the base of the Laurentian Fan at the top of the Sohm Abyssal Plain. Thanks for catching that!
-Yes, aircraft carrier. I do bring in some homage to the second film, despite it being a flop.
-AFSPC - Air Force Space Command
-CDC – Combat Decision Center
-SECAF – Secretary of the Air Force
-UAV – Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. Here they are using Predators.
-"Outdated"/M16 – In Rachel's time, they had already replaced the M16 with the better individual carbine, which USA military will be doing sometime before 2013.
-"NEST-1" isn't a specific aircraft. They're using a C-5M Super Galaxy here, but it's like Air Force One, which isn't one specific plane; it's just whatever the President is on. NEST-1 acts like that, only it's when they're carrying at least one or more Autobots with them on a specific NEST-sanctioned mission. If other aircraft go out with other Autobots, they become NEST-2, NEST-3, etc. :D
-Amedee is Amedee Army Airfield, the only "local" airfield with a runway long enough for the C5.
Chapter Notes

Expect an extra update for Christmas, by the way! :)  

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters  
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Plumas National Park  
NEST Base

As he took a shot at one of those irritating symbiotes, Thundercracker was quietly reveling in having his weapons protocols back in order, and as Jazz would have said, "just in the nick of time, too". He had been shocked at how quickly the situation at Plumas had deteriorated. Three or four Decepticons and several symbiotes had landed and begun to tear up the compound so quickly, the human NEST operatives had barely had a chance to respond before their armory had been blown, leaving them with only hand weapons and whatever amount of larger ordnance that hadn't been locked away when the attack occurred.

There were currently only six Autobots on base and, of course, none of them were front-line warriors. Of course, Ironhide and the twins had gone with Prime into battle. No one had expected an assault here, on their own home turf. That left Prowl and the scout, Bumblebee, to lead the recently-arrived scientists in a counter assault and provide as much support to the NEST soldiers as possible. As he heard Prowl directing Jolt and Hound to circle around to the south side of the compound and secure Hangar D, he privately admitted that Prowl's tactical abilities were impressive, and he was glad the mech was on "their" side. But it seemed impossible that they would stop the Decepticons without more fire power.

Fortunately, there were more than just Autobots on the base now. Thundercracker had felt better when his guns had been brought back online, courtesy of a quick code adjustment from this world's Wheeljack (having the scientist touch him to do so, though, was incredibly painful) and a load of ammunition given to him by Jolt—more ammo than he'd had in over fifty years—but that feeling of comfort had been erased when he realized who they were up against.

Soundwave—one of the fiercest and most terrifying of Megatron's inner circle—was there, along with two or three other Decepticons and his monstrous symbiotes. Thundercracker knew Soundwave was there from listening to Prowl, and had heard enough of the comm. chatter to know that at least two more full sized Decepticons had landed. He himself had dispatched one of the larger 'Cons to the Pit when it had attacked Hangar B, where his humans were, but the symbiotes were each nearly as dangerous as any larger mech. They specialized in creating havoc, sending NEST soldiers scattering with their wild fire, setting off the energon containers and nearly blowing up Hangar A. The Decepticons had done their research well, probably by using one of the symbiotes as a spy, and knew just where to hit them the hardest. The chaotic destruction they were causing was a bit too obvious, however; Thundercracker could tell the goal of the symbiotes was to distract the Autobots.
while Soundwave and the others obtained their objective, and that was far more alarming.

::Jazz, Soundwave is headed for Hangar A!:: Bluestreak called over the comm. channel.

::He's headed for th' security bunker. TC, get the kids outta here. Blue—yer wit' me.:: Jazz said hurriedly as he sped off, Bluestreak following closely. Jazz was clearly focused on successfully fighting back and preventing the 'Cons from getting what they wanted. Unlike Jazz, Thundercracker had never been in the security bunker, which was located underground, near Hangar A, but he suspected that the majority of the intelligence that the Autobots and NEST had gathered on Decepticon movements, as well as any valuable weapons, would be stored there.

Thundercracker was more concerned with doing his own job: getting their human companions out alive. Checking carefully to make sure none of their enemies were lurking just outside the door, he walked quickly out into the smoke-filled air, weaving a path that would safely take them past the burning container units. The humans stuck to his shadow, with Rachel and Barns bringing up the rear to watch for anything chasing them. Despite having his radar on, Thundercracker had no idea what to expect from their enemies.

Something shrieked nearby and Thundercracker ducked as low as his body would allow, taking cover behind another plane that hadn't been destroyed yet. The humans also crouched closely and looked up at the sky, waiting for something to attack. Thundercracker could feel a Cybertronian signal approaching them.

Luckily, Vortex distracted the incoming Decepticon, a small flier, by throwing a barrel of something at him. Unable to shoot anything, he flared his blades as the Decepticon shot past him, slicing off a corner of the smaller Decepticon's wing, and sending it careening into the side of Hangar C. Vortex stalked off after the Decepticon, intent on destroying it, as Thundercracker led his group of humans further onto the airfield and away from the center of the base.

Although he was focused on getting off the base, he couldn't help but listen to the terse commentary from the others on comms. Jazz's training and experience as an officer and frontline warrior put him right into the thick of things, as he stepped into the role that Bumblebee just didn't have the experience to fill and began to lead the counterassault. ::Bluestreak, what do you see?: he asked the sniper, who was out of sight, probably at a vantage point.

On the field of battle, Bluestreak lost all of his naïveté and the annoying stream of babble. ::NEST has several armored vehicles moving, and they are firing on two of the three remaining symbiotes,:: he replied. ::Arcee and 'Rider are with Jolt and they have that gray 'Con down. Soundwave—I can't see him!::

::Slag it!: Jazz turned raced directly into the fire raging around Hangar B. ::TC, you get those kids t' th' forest! Hide! Blue, you keep me posted. 'Bee, where are you?:

Thundercracker did not feel like leaving his teammates to deal with the battle alone. They had to do this properly. ::Vortex, get up into the air and figure out how many we're dealing with!: he ordered.

::My flight gear is still disabled.: Vortex replied with a snarl. ::Arcee, you're fastest. Drive and report::

Before Arcee could comply, Wildrider interrupted. ::I am faster!: He was already transforming. ::Little femme stay here. I vill report::

::Stay safe, all of you!: Jazz said, reluctant to separate anyone. Instead, he turned his focus elsewhere. ::Prowl, did ya hear all of that?:
Yes, and what the hell do you two think you are doing?: Prowl shot back almost immediately. He sounded distracted, most likely doing many things all at once. :You are not military entities. You cannot take charge of this situation as though you are still an Autobot officer!: Prowl's apparent anger pissed Thundercracker off more than anything. He could almost hear Jazz's anger boiling over the comm. channel, the frustrations of fighting and trying to figure out how to survive this overwhelming them all.

Excuse me? You have a Decepticon general tearin' up yer security compound, slag it!: Jazz shouted. From a distance, Thundercracker could see him flipping through the air out of the other side of Hangar B, firing at the other flying symbiote. :Ya got no backup, and the humans ain't got a single weapon worth usin'. You need us! What the hell else didja give us weapons back fer, if not ta help ya in a snafu like this?:

To their surprise, Prowl snarled back, :Then get over here and DO something! Soundwave has entered the security bunker, and Hoist is down: He shut the line off with an audible click.

An open invitation for a lot of things, although Thundercracker knew they didn't have the time to gloat or ask for specifics. They had to help defend the base and that meant taking out Soundwave. They just had to play by NEST's rules. To survive, Thundercracker would do pretty much anything, so this was acceptable.

You heard him. Arcee, stick with Jolt—Rider, you an' Vortex are wit' me. We'll meet up with Prowl by th' security bunker.: Jazz said, never stopping. :TC, why are you still here? !:

Don't do anything stupid.: Thundercracker warned before returning his attention to the organics crowding around his legs. He spoke out loud, "We're moving on in thirty seconds. Don't stop or go further than me. If Soundwave attacks, I'm the bigger target, so don't get caught in the cross fire."

Rachel sent him a sharp look, but said nothing. The other humans nodded and Thundercracker looked out across the airfield. They had several hundred yards of open space to get past, and while Thundercracker was certain they wouldn't have to worry about Soundwave or the other large Decepticons targeting them specifically, he worried about the last two symbiotes. They seemed to like targeting humans particularly.

"Move," he said, uncoiling from the ground and stepping out with his sensors blazing for any incoming signals. The Cybertronian entities were all on the other side of the base.

The humans, his own four and the two civilians, moved quickly, so he kept his pace up to make sure he stayed a decent amount of space ahead. He didn't need them getting hit by the remains of an attack aimed for him.

He saw several batches of NEST soldiers who were still on base running, shouting various things as they tried to collect themselves into some sort of order. Four armored vehicles raced past them, heading towards Hangar A. He was glad at least a few of the humans had been smart or lucky enough to get into the vehicles, which would provide them with both armor and armor-piercing weapons. Without them, the humans were ineffectual against the Decepticons. The idea that the unidentified sightings over the Atlantic had been a ruse just to get the Autobots away from the main base was becoming more and more believable.

Behind them, he heard a loud crashing sound and could immediately sense a large energy signature flare up on his radar. Another mech—and not friendly. He prepared to turn and give cover fire. "Get ready to run," he said to his humans, but something distracted all of them.
"He's got the Shard!" a human soldier shouted, far away, but close enough that Thundercracker knew whom they were talking about.

Thundercracker turned completely around in shock. There was another explosion, the remains of one of the armored vehicles he thought, and he could see a massive Cybertronian form beyond the flames of another container unit. Soundwave was unmistakable from any distance. For a split second, the jet wanted to grab as many of the humans as he could and run, fearful of the havoc the Decepticon general could cause to harm them. He could take Soundwave alone, maybe, if he had the advantage of surprise. But there was no way he was going to take that chance while the humans were there with him—

Soundwave stood perfectly still and was holding his hand up. He wasn't holding a weapon. It was cupped ever so slightly, as if he were holding something fragile and small, like a rock. Thundercracker stared hard, until suddenly, he realized. He had the All Spark fragment.

Thundercracker gaped, knowing he was wasting time—knowing he was standing out in the open like a perfect target. But the All Spark fragment was literally a hundred yards away and he was right there. Soundwave had the fragment.

He had to do something.

"Soundwave!" he roared, ignoring common sense. He could kill the other mech easily in a physical fight, but Soundwave had more than just guns at his disposal. Thundercracker didn't get closer.

They couldn't let him take the fragment, though. That was more powerful than just a piece of metal. It still had power. Thundercracker could feel it in the air. If they took it, the Decepticons, they could use it on Megatron. They could do anything and Thundercracker couldn't just stand by and let this happen. Not again.

Slowly, Soundwave turned around and acknowledged the larger flier. Thundercracker held his ground, even under the expressionless stare the communications specialist sent him. It had really only been about fifty years since Thundercracker had last seen or heard of his ex-commander, but it felt like megavorns. It was like staring down a complete stranger.

Soundwave's visor narrowed, and for a moment, he hesitated. "Designation: Thundercracker?" he said, voice more alien and mechanical than Thundercracker remembered. The question in that voice was clear.

The Decepticon probably knew the other Thundercracker, the one still in the ranks of the Seekers, still blindly following Starscream as if any of the fighting still mattered. Thundercracker's green optics narrowed, both in anger toward the Decepticons and in the realization he had to do something. "Designate this!" he snarled and then shot rapidly at the energon container behind Soundwave.

It exploded and Thundercracker immediately regretted doing that, because only then did he remember the humans were with him. He looked down as they yelled out at the explosive force. Soundwave had been hit and nearly fell forward, but suddenly, Thundercracker realized his priorities couldn't change.

Primus help him, he had to leave. Turning, he left Soundwave in the flames and prayed he wouldn't come after them.

"Slag it—!" Thundercracker snarled. He had to keep stopping when the humans did, having to make
sure they kept up and that he didn't accidently step on one. "Move! Don't stop!"

"But the All Spark—!" Sam cried, trying to turn around. Barns grabbed him and urged him to run. They couldn't do anything now.

Thundercracker spared one more glance behind him and regretted doing so. What he saw made him stop, which made the humans stop as well. Rachel, gun raised, saw it first.

"What the hell is he—?" she started to ask.

Soundwave, despite his victory and the fire around him, was no longer holding the All Spark fragment. Thundercracker's optics couldn't find it at first, and then he looked down right in front of Soundwave's feet. The shard lay on the burnt cement like a discarded piece of shrapnel, like any unimportant piece of metal.

And then, Soundwave lowered his cannon and fired—right at the fragment.

"WHOA!" Rachel yelled, just as an explosion larger than even the energon crates shot over the base.

Thundercracker's systems whined in protest as the electrical shockwave hit him first. The physical blast sent them all sprawling, though the actual explosion was more energy than fire or debris. The origins of the explosion came from below Soundwave himself, from under his smoking cannon—Came from what was left of the All Spark.

Thundercracker stared—stared hard—but the image didn't make any sense, no matter how long he looked.

…What?

Soundwave stood back, satisfied, and retracted his cannon. He stepped back, straightening up, revealing a hole in the ground where one would have expected the decimated remains of his prize to be.

Below Thundercracker, the humans struggled to get up. When they did, they also saw what had happened. Sam made a strangled sound and stumbled forward, aghast.

"Why?" he shouted, practically screaming over the sound of the fires and nearby fighting. "WHY DID HE JUST BLOW IT UP? !"

Thundercracker looked at the smoldering crater, which was all that was left of the All Spark. Just dust and smoke.

Why did he just blow it up—? !

Inwardly, Thundercracker realized that something was wrong. Something was incredibly wrong.

Soundwave turned, disregarding him and the humans, and looked upward. He was going to leave. Was that the only thing they had come to do? Just—just destroy the one relic left that could have changed the course of the war in either direction?

"We never had a shard," Jazz had told Lennox in debriefing. "Not in our timeline, at least. Th' 'Cons never needed it."

Thundercracker shuddered.
Out of the corner of his eye, he saw more mechs showing up. Jolt, looking like he had taken at least one missile to the chest plates at some point, opened fire on Soundwave. The larger Decepticon fired back, but was forced to duck for cover when Bumblebee and Hound appeared and attacked as well. Thundercracker was yanked out of his reverie and realized they still had to move.

With Soundwave being herded away by the Autobots, Thundercracker was surprised to see Bumblebee suddenly turn and dash back toward their group.

"GO!" the yellow 'Bot shouted, voice fritzing from the effort. "Get them out of here!"

Thundercracker threw his arm out, motioning for the scout to go. "Everyone, follow me, we're going!" he said. He looked back at Bumblebee. "Autobot, you take yours!"

Bumblebee, for all of his Autobot-ways, wasn't stupid. "Yes! Go!" he called back, transforming. Sam and Mikaela threw themselves inside and he took off for the gate.

If only he could do the same. Even if he could fly, Thundercracker could only take one person, due to the ineffectiveness of the human aircraft he had modeled himself after ages ago. Instead of transforming, he continued on foot, making sure Barns, Kass, Danny and Rachel were still with him. They moved as quickly as ever, as if they were still on Europe's soil and this was just another day with drones chasing them down.

This wasn't right, Thundercracker thought in despair, as if the universe cared about being fair after all of this time. All the signs had indicated this world would be safer—that it would be a better place to live than the one they had left behind fifty years in the future. But it wasn't. It was the same, with the same dangers. And it was worse, because it had appeared to be so promising, had given them such hope that it would be different this time.

Finally, they made it to the edge of the forest. Thundercracker broke through the trees, unaccustomed to seeing such full branches. It was darker and far greener than the ones they had left across the ocean, but all at once, he felt more at home than he had since they had come to the NEST base. He knew how to defend himself and his family on the soil, felt far more comfortable there than on the cement pad of the airfield. He could still hear and sense the explosions and the warring NEST and Decepticon forces. He prayed Jazz and the remaining members of their group would keep their heads down and meet them eventually.

He let the humans decide the path to take, Rachel barreling ahead furiously. She skidded to a stop after several minutes and spun around. All of the humans stopped then, breathing heavily, as they stood shaking in the dense woods. Thundercracker looked around warily. His path was obvious to follow, with all of the broken trees practically pointing an arrow their way. Perhaps he should have branched off in the opposite direction for a bit, to lead any enemies away from the humans.

For now, they would wait. No Cybertronian signals had followed them or were anywhere near by, even the Autobots. Thundercracker strained his sensors to their limits, trying to pick out just where their enemies were. It seemed like most of the fighting was being dragged out further away, but he couldn't trust anything. They could still clearly hear the echoing sounds of gunfire and missiles being fired.

Kass, trembling visibly, gasped for air. "What's going on?" she asked, horrified.

Thundercracker shook his helm and kept his optics toward the base, waiting for the sounds of violence to stop. "I don't know. I don't know," he said, processors reeling. "Oh, Primus…"

Why had Soundwave destroyed the fragment?
Back on the base, the sirens continued to wail.

Onboard NEST-1
CFS St. John's, Newfoundland

The moment they had landed in St. John's, Lennox felt the sudden urge to just run. He wanted to run across the wide expanse of ocean in front of them and just—just do his job. He couldn't. He couldn't do anything but bark orders to soldiers who were just as frustrated and helpless as he was. He had to watch the Autobots crowd the edge of the base's beach boundaries, looking out at the water with equal despair.

They couldn't do one damn thing.

"We have five Raptors inbound to the site," Epps called out from his communications table. They had forgone dragging their equipment to the inside of the air base. And Lennox felt better standing with the Autobots. None of them cared about being seen now, anyway; they had higher priorities.

"Have the Decepticons surfaced yet?" Optimus asked, having just stopped pacing. Ironhide did enough of that for the both of them, however. Even Ratchet looked ready to start blowing miscellaneous things up in his impatience.

"Not yet, not from what I'm seeing," Epps replied. He was keeping an eye on the monitor feeds from the Predators they'd had circling the area for the last twenty minutes. "Drones are keeping eyes on the Abyss and the wreckage from the Stennis. No movement yet."

Lennox ran a heavy hand over his face. "Great…" He felt as though the waiting would kill them long before the Decepticons would. Until they saw something in the water, there was literally nothing even the Air Force could do. At least they had the Raptors now, plus the Canadian Air Force was three minutes out.

"Hey!" Epps yelled out, surprising the rest of them. He was hunched further over the monitor display. "We got a disturbance!"

"The USS Virginia just cleared Nova Scotia," one of the tactics officers announced, glancing back at Lennox. She shook her head in disappointment. "They're not going to make it in time, sir."

Epps stood up completely, startling the humans standing nearby. "We got mechs!" he said. He grabbed his head-mic and shouted, "Raptors, open fire with sabot rounds!"

Lennox spun around, hoping to see something—anything—over the ocean, but the gray horizon remained blank. Turning, he rushed back to the desk and Epps slid over to let him look at the video feed. His heart pounded furiously as he desperately tried to see what their fate was.

At first, the grainy image from the Predators showed nothing but waves and the remains of the Stennis: burning pieces of debris, chunks of metal, bodies. Then, suddenly, he saw dark shadows appearing beneath the surface of the water. Gripping the table ledge tightly, Lennox said a quick prayer as two of the Raptors fired. The explosions sent water flying and only revealed what had to be metal. Mechs.

But then, to Lennox's dismay, it all fell apart.

The two Raptors were hit and torn in half when two mechs suddenly surfaced, shooting up out of the water, weapons firing as they emerged. These mechs had been equipped with some sort of
propulsion system for traveling through the water, ascending and descending rapidly, and they could apparently launch themselves into the sky right from the water. Lennox swore violently, cries of dismay rising up from several of his soldiers as the remaining Raptor pilots reported back the loss of the two aircraft, plus how the water obscured their targets.

"What's happening, Will?" Ironhide demanded, frustrated.

"Just lost two Raptors," he said, gritting his teeth. He kept his eyes glued to the screen. "God help us."

He prayed—that the Decepticons would come to shore. If they did, they could finally fight them like NEST had been designed to do. This was a poor display of what they were capable of doing, that was for sure. The Canadian Navy was within a few miles of the location of the *Stennis*, but they were being told to hold their position until the fighting was over. They would be unable to fight these mechs, and there was no point in losing more ships, more men.

"Where is the body? Do they have it with them?" Epps asked, scouring the video feed intensely.

"I can't see them carrying anything," Lennox replied, watching as the water kept being tossed upward as more mechs shot up, out of the water. The drone's camera zoomed in, but the white surf blocked most of the details. He couldn't even count the mechs leaving. It was definitely more than four.

The Raptors took off in pursuit of the fliers, but Lennox knew that wouldn't help for long. He peered closer as all but one of the drones were reassigned to follow the unnaturally fast alien craft, who were moving northward in close formation, but Lennox managed to look at each of them, counting at least five now. None of them were on fire, but that didn't mean the Fallen wasn't with them in some way.

The build on one of them was uncommon for the Seekers—and yet was definitely something Lennox had seen before. His heart leaped up to his throat yet again as he managed to put a name to the mech flying away.

"…He's…" Epps began, clearly noticing it as well.

Lennox spun around and called out, "Optimus!" He stumbled, his legs feeling weak, as he tried to get closer to the Autobot. He gestured out at the water, mind racing. "He's alive! I saw him!"

Optimus flinched. "Who?"

It didn't make sense. It didn't make sense. It wasn't *fair*—

"*Megatron!*" Lennox said. He grasped his head with his right hand, trying to keep calm. Nothing that was happening made any damn sense. "I saw—I saw him moving! He's whole! His whole body is back together!"

All of the Autobots gawked. "That's impossible!" Ratchet said loudly. He looked between Prime and Ironhide, attempting to find reason with them, maybe. "They don't have the All Spark fragment! Even if they had gotten it from the base, they could not have gotten it here so quickly!"

Lennox felt part of the Earth cave beneath him. "Is that the only thing that could resurrect him?" he asked. He sounded pathetically desperate.

"Yes!" Ratchet said. Lennox could hear a tremor in his voice though. None of them had any answers now. "The only thing! Anything else—it's impossible!"
Optimus just stared down at Lennox and then looked back out at the ocean, silent and grim.

"Where'd the Fallen go?" Sideswipe asked. He looked serious, which was never a good sign.

"After his attack on the Stennis, we lost sight of him. Never saw him again," Epps said, regretfully. He glanced over at the Autobots. "Can you pick anything up on your radars?"

Optimus frowned deeply, though they all dutifully turned back toward the water. "We're too far," he said. "They aren't approaching."

"The drones are picking them leaving by air, the fliers. Megatron included. They're headed north, back towards the Pole," Epps added, earning their attention. He kept his eyes on his monitor, shaking his head slowly. "The Fallen's gone. I didn't see him." It was like they were hunting a ghost.

"What about the grounders?" Optimus asked.

"There's only two. They're…" Epps trailed off. He slammed his fist down on the table and turned. "Great, we lost them."

"Probably hiding amongst the wreckage, the cowards," Ironhide spat.

Lennox nodded. "Or using that propulsion mechanism to travel under the surface of the water. Probably how they got here in the first place, since we only tracked the two to this location. Tell the Canadians to fire on the debris, take no chances!" he called out to tactics. He turned to Epps. "Keep an eye on the sky. If they get close—"

"I will blast them the fuck out of the air, believe me!" Sideswipe interrupted, angry. He held a transformed cannon up at the sky, threatening. "Those fraggers!" Several human NEST members glared upwards in agreement.

"We must get back to base," Ratchet added. He looked down at Lennox, grim. "We lost contact an hour ago, Lennox. There's no telling what's happened."

They had their priorities; now that Megatron was confirmed in enemy hands, they had to go to the next thing on their list, which was the NEST compound and the shard.

Turning, Lennox stared out at the open water, mind reeling. "I can't believe this happened… and we couldn't stop it," he whispered, mostly to himself. "This wasn't how this was supposed to go."

How were they supposed to explain this to Keller? To anyone? How was the most advanced, alien, task force on Earth incapable of stopping something this horrendous? Their greatest enemy was once again alive and they… had been forced to stand by and let it happen. It was like a nightmare. A real, never-ending nightmare.

Behind him, he heard one of the mechs walk closer. When he looked up, he saw Optimus peering down at him with sorrowful optics. "It was not your fault, nor anyone's here," he said, severe. "We will find them and defeat them, the Fallen included. Don't lose faith, Lennox."

It was easy to say that. Lennox had faith in himself as a leader, in Epps and the Autobots to be their best and better—but how could they have faith in themselves after this?

"We're heading back to Plumas," he said loudly. He caught Epps' eye and shook his head. "Move out."

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It could have been worse, Jazz kept telling himself. It could have been so much worse.

When they had finally gotten to the bunker, Soundwave had vanished along with the All Spark fragment. They had found Prowl pinned down behind the remains of an APC, defending Wheeljack and Hoist from a vicious Decepticon warrior. Jazz and Wildrider drove the 'Con off, Wildrider working with Hound and Jolt to continue the pursuit. By that point, Prowl and Wheeljack had stabilized Hoist and moved him to the medical hangar, leaving Jazz, Bluestreak and Vortex to work on fire suppression, redirecting a water line that had been exposed within the cement. They had just put out the fires closest to the security bunker, and all of the sensitive computers inside of it, when the last remaining Decepticon showed up.

The way the unfamiliar mech tore up a line of human soldiers with a spray of bullets reawakened a dark feeling in Jazz's spark. He had seen violence done to humans by the drones, but he hadn't seen a real Decepticon since... well... Blitzwing. To see one hurt a human, any human, was enough to make him sick.

Vortex, apparently thinking the same thing, reacted in a similar way he had to Blitzwing. He attacked the unfriendly mech viciously, tearing through his limbs with his blades before ripping the mech apart with his hands. He didn't need guns to kill. Jazz knew none of them would comment later on how violent Vortex had been with one of his own ex-teammates. Maybe they had known each other, maybe not. But it didn't matter to Vortex now, apparently. All Jazz could think of when he saw the dead humans was, what if that had been one of ours? Most likely, that was what Vortex, and Wildrider, had thought as well.

They had handled that 'Con quickly and Jazz scouted out the airfield for their remaining enemies. The symbiotes had fled with Soundwave and, for a brief time, Jazz was almost panicked by the thought that they had allowed their enemies to take the All Spark fragment with them. But then Thundercracker had comm'ed him with the truth.

::He didn't take it.: Thundercracker replied. He sounded anguished. ::Jazz, he destroyed it.: :

That had made all the energon in him seem to suddenly run cold. ::What? !::

::Soundwave... he destroyed the All Spark fragment,: Thundercracker replied, weary.

Jazz didn't believe it at first; he just couldn't. Why? Why would Soundwave deliberately destroy the All Spark? Was it a trap or a ruse? That made no sense. It didn't make any sense at all.

::I saw it too., Bumblebee broke in. ::He dropped it on the ground and just... blasted it:: The scout sounded both depressed and horrified. ::There was nothing left.: :

After what seemed like ages, the explosions stopped. Jazz heard over the radio that the soldiers, along with Hound, Jolt and Wildrider, finished off the last Decepticon, who had actually made it off base before they had chased him down. The air was still full of smoke and fires continued to burn all over the place, thankfully in small clumps. Jazz, after getting a status report from his people to make sure everyone was alright, sought out the only Autobot commander left on base. It wasn't hard to find him, even as he had to navigate past injured NEST soldiers and ruined equipment. He found the Praxian standing by what had to be the remains of a cargo truck.

"Prowl!" he called out. Prowl turned and seemed surprised to see the saboteur. Jazz walked up briskly. "What's goin' on?"
Prowl, despite having been calm during the attack, was looking far more jittery now as he started walking away from the remains of the truck. "We've killed three of the Decepticons who landed. Soundwave—have you seen him?" he asked, distracted.

"He's gone. 'Bee saw him take off." Jazz hesitated. "Prowl—TC said—," he began, trying to stay calm himself. It was the worst feeling, having to be the one to say this. "He said Soundwave destroyed th' fragment."

The black-and-white mech in front of him stopped and turned around. He stared down at Jazz with large blue optics. "Impossible," he said. "Soundwave killed two humans and nearly decapitated Hoist getting into the bunker to get it." He stopped, struggling. "Thundercracker must have been mistaken."

"'Bee saw it, too," Jazz pointed out, grim.

Prowl stopped and shook his helm. "It's impossible. It's…" All at once, Prowl seemed to twitch and his optics blinked. To Jazz, it was a familiar sight. "It cannot be destroyed. That is—that is not—" the Autobot officer started to say, his vocalizer glitching with static.

Jazz grabbed the Autobot by the shoulders and held him firmly at arms length. "Prowl!" he snapped. They could not fall apart now, and Prowl most definitely could not have a system failure in the middle of a disaster like this, over-worked logic core be damned. "Focus! Don't freeze up. Ya gotta keep yer head t'gether, ya got people countin' on ya."

Stiff under his hands, Prowl's optics stopped flashing and the mech seemed to collect himself. "D-did any of yours…?" he began to ask.

"No, we're good. Vortex got some shrapnel damage, an' Arcee got burned earlier, but they'll live," Jazz replied, shaking his helm. He stood back and put a good amount of distance between them again. "Did Prime call yet?"

Prowl stood back further. His momentary showing of his logic center glitch was gone now. "There has been no contact with NEST-1. I can only presume Soundwave's interference is causing this," he replied. He looked out at the airfield. "Where are your four humans and Thundercracker now?"

"In th' forest, with Bee, an' Sam an' 'Kaela," Jazz said, sighing. He glanced out at the forest once before looking back at Prowl, severe. "Tell me what t' do an' we'll do it, Prowl. We got yer back."

For all of the bad feelings between them, Jazz trusted Prowl. At his core, he was still the same mech, with the same ethical base and clear devotion to Autobot principles. He knew they could trust the tactician to do his best to protect those under his command. What was more, Jazz knew Prowl needed their help now, too, if he would allow it. Jazz prayed the Autobot SIC would be strong enough to accept it.

It took him a moment, but Prowl slowly nodded. "…For now, we must tend to the wounded and bring our security back up. Whether Soundwave took the All Spark or destroyed it doesn't matter right now. He escaped regardless." Prowl met Jazz with a neutral stare. "Get your people back together."

Jazz glanced back at the forest again. "Kass was trained t'help out wit' emergency field repairs, an' all th'kids know first aid. But d'ya think it's safe bringin' 'em back t' th' compound?" Radar was showing clear skies, but that didn't mean anything. They couldn't not expect a second assault.

Prowl frowned. "We'll have to take that risk. There is no sense scattering into the woods like
animals." Jazz frowned, not commenting on how not too long ago, they were running around the woods like that. Prowl continued, sighing, "I—."

And then he stopped short.

The flicker of his optics told Jazz that he was getting some sort of transmission, and judging from the fact Jazz wasn't picking up anything coming from people nearby, it had to have been-off base. Jazz prayed desperately for good news.

After a long minute, Prowl frowned and seemed to cut the connection. "…NEST-1 has landed in CFS St. Johns," he said in a clipped voice.

"Then they're safe," Jazz said, relieved. At least Prime was still with them. "No 'Cons tried t' take 'em out?"

"No," Prowl physically trembled and all at once Jazz knew something else was wrong. Prowl slowly shook his head. "They had another target. The Abyss was the real target. The aircraft carrier guarding it, the USS John C. Stennis, was partially capsized during the assault."

The name was eerily familiar. Jazz stared at Prowl, processors reeling. He had heard this before. A long, long time ago.

Prowl watched Jazz warily before looking out at the airfield again. His doorwings quivered.

"...The Fallen is here," he said at long last, confirming the spark-wrenching fear Jazz felt. "Or so they believe. He did it."

Jazz started to shake. "...What?" he asked. To his audio receptors, he sounded far, far away, even to himself.

"Jazz..." Prowl offlined his optics, bracing himself. "They took the body. What Prime said was brief, but they believe the Decepticons have taken Megatron's remains, or they have reactivated them. They aren't sure."

His words were met with silence. Jazz just stared at the other mech, praying he had misunderstood. Prowl's words echoed across his processors mercilessly.

"No... that's not..." Jazz tried to say. Words seemed like an impossible concept. Part of his mind started to scream. "You said it was safe," he said, not caring if he sounded accusing.

Prowl turned and glared. "I also thought it implausible that Soundwave could have been on Earth, let alone attack our own base!"

He started to walk away, presumably to get back to fixing the mess the Decepticons had left them. But Jazz was still standing there on weak joints and still silently begging to have misheard.

"No, you don't get it. Oh, God. Oh, Primus, you don't get it. Prowl!" he called out. He reached out, the gesturing causing Prowl to slow. "Please, tell me yer lyin'. Please! Th' Fallen can't be here!"

The look Prowl gave him wasn't condescension, but it wasn't sympathetic. It was the look all officers gave their soldiers in times where the worst-case scenario had happened, when there were no answers they wanted to hear. Just... cold truth they had to deal with.

Prowl turned around again and Jazz stumbled back. He wanted to hear the other mech say he was lying, or that it wasn't true. But Prowl just kept walking.
Jazz stepped forward. "HE CAN'T!" he screamed. Prowl kept walking away and Jazz felt part of his sanity leave with him. "Prowl!"

He was left standing there, alone, and even the distant sounds of humans yelling orders, and fires being put out seemed a million miles away. Jazz stared blindly, speechless.

It couldn't be true, he tried to reason.

Because if the fragment was gone—

Because if the Fallen had arrived—

That meant… that meant that this world… was the same.

The same horrors that had torn Jazz's world to shreds, the same devastation that had brought mankind to its knees prematurely, the same violence that had taken away everything he had known as home and kin—

*It was all the same.*

"No…” he managed again, turning slowly, visor wide. He couldn't—there was no way he could accept that. Not again.

Oh, Primus.

Jazz felt, piece by piece, their world crumble beneath him.

It was happening. All of it. The Fallen, Galvatron, the return of the Decepticons—

It was happening again… and that meant the world they had done everything to leave behind, the world Wheeljack had died getting them out of, was about to become a reality, their sacrifices be damned.

*Oh, Primus, no.*

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**End Chapter 18.**

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**A/Ns:**

- Yup. Bye-bye, fragment!

- *USS Virginia* is a submarine in the United States Navy; its home port is in Connecticut.

- And this, ladies and gents, is why it was so freaking stupid for ROTF to have the Autobot base on an *island*. LMFAO THEY'RE ALL GROUNDERS, thus useless in marine/aerial battles! Jeeeeez.
The various parties deal with the hand they've been given. Cue the depressing Linkin Park theme song!

Merry Christmas and a happy holidays, if you celebrate it! :)

Many thanks, Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Plumas National Park
NEST Base

When Optimus Prime drove past the gates and onto the remains of their nearly demolished compound, he realized that they had made the worst two mistakes they could have possibly made; they had underestimated their enemy and ignored the warnings brought to them by well meaning people. But it wasn't the time to point fingers or get angry. It was the time to react in a way that might prevent future attacks and future loss of life.

He had to admit that it was too late for a lot of things, though. Megatron was alive. The Fallen, a monster even those who had escaped him once in a foreign future didn't know anything about, was on Earth. The Decepticons were back. Thousands of American soldiers had died when the USS Stennis capsized, and many others had been lost during the attack on the Thule and Plumas bases as well. The Autobots had almost lost Hoist.

And all of that sacrifice was for nothing.

Megatron had been reactivated and they had lost the All Spark fragment.

When he had finally stopped staring at the scene in shock, Optimus had been greeted by a harassed, exhausted and scorched Prowl, who had given him several status updates before being called away to deal with powering the security grid. Optimus was glad for the temporary reprieve, because the five hours of the return flight and the hour drive from the landing site hadn't been nearly long enough for him to reflect properly on the situation. He found himself wandering aimlessly through the ruins of the security bunker, staring at the rubble for almost an hour, cataloguing their, his, utter failure.

Months ago Prowl had briefed him on the security risks of the Plumas base, and after consultation with Ironhide, Lennox and Keller they had determined that their presence would mitigate most of those risks... at least until they could move the fragment to a more defensible location in a few weeks. Even the warnings carried from the future by Jazz hadn't caused any of them to rethink their
evaluation of the risk level. The general consensus was that the time until that move was so short and the Decepticons hadn't shown any interest in the fragment to this point, they could make sure it was safe by providing Autobots to defend it.

But they hadn't realized the level of the threat against them. Focused on the arrival of Jazz and his group, they hadn't been alert to Decepticon espionage, didn't realize how much their enemy knew of their own plans. They had allowed their warriors to be led away from where they were needed, leaving only a small force of inexperienced and non-combatant Autobots to defend the fragment from their enemies. Meanwhile their warriors were forced to flail in their own helplessness as their enemies got exactly what they wanted. It felt like this was a horrible simulation. A nightmare, Mikaela had repeated several times, before she left with Bumblebee and Sam. Optimus finally felt as though he understood that very human sentiment.

"It's not your fault, Prime," Ironhide said quietly as they moved back to Hangar C, or the remains of it. "There was no warning. Even the humans' satellites missed the incoming signals."

It would take more than that to shake the feeling of failure from the Prime's spark, however. This had been an unexpected, but inexcusable event. They had lost their greatest weapon and resource, and had allowed for their greatest enemy to escape alive.

"The risk level is too high for Keller to make the trip in person. He's available to speak with you in an hour, Optimus," Epps announced, filling in for Lennox. The Major was all over the base, trying to hold himself together as he collated casualty, injury and damage reports. The lists for all three were far too long.

Ratchet came back from the med-bay sooner than Optimus had prayed, however. "Hoist will live, but he's off duty for a while. In fact, right now I don't even want to move him," the medic said, shaking his head. "I really don't know how you managed to save him, Wheeljack."

"The real issue was energon loss," Wheeljack said, glum. "If Prowl hadn't been there to help me get transfusion lines running during the battle, he never would have made it. And even afterwards it was touch and go. I had Mikaela focus on splicing the severed data cables while Jolt and I reattached the support columns. But I'll admit, I was worried. I wished you were here."

"I feel so useless," Hound lamented. He stared at the floor, a gesture many of the Autobots were mimicking. Everything felt heavy with despair. "I can't believe so many awful things happened, all so quickly together."

"I'm going to fragging slaughter those aftplated—argh!" Sideswipe violently kicked one of the charred remains of a container unit, sending it clattering across the hangar. Part of the roof was gone and a large portion of the southern wall was missing.

Optimus wanted nothing more than to do the same. He wanted to find Megatron and put him back in his grave, where he belonged. What bothered him most was the loss of the fragment, however. It didn't just unnerve him that NEST no longer had it. It would have been a different matter if the Decepticons had just taken it with them. They could always fight for it back later.

"Isn't there anything left of it?" asked Jolt.

"There is nothing to retrieve," Wheeljack confirmed, earfins glowing lowly. He shook his helm sadly. "Just lingering radiation. It was incredible that it hadn't shattered already, the stability of the lattice structure was so compromised by the explosive force it emitted in Mission City that Soundwave's plasma cannons didn't have to do much to completely shatter it. It probably could have been destroyed by an impact from a human bullet."
No… it was gone, from both parties' hands. It was just… gone.

"Why, though?" Hound asked, desperately. His despair was shared by all of the mechs present. "Why'd they destroy th' only thing we had left o'th' All Spark?"

"When I catch that fragger, I'll find out for you," Sunstreaker spat, engines snarling. "Those idiots!"

"They don't know what they've done. Whether this was just a move to take power from us, or to spite us," Ratchet agreed, gravely, "they've destroyed something for all Cybertronians. We will never recover from this war now, ever."

Normally, Optimus would try to dissuade his troops from thinking so negatively, but he said nothing. There was nothing he could think of or say that would do the job right—simply because he agreed. They would never recover from this loss.

The last light of the afternoon fled them and Optimus felt uneasy standing there in their own base, with the darkness creeping in from all sides. They'd finally gotten the generators up and running, and power run to the remaining hangars, but it still felt empty and terribly exposed. From the way the NEST soldiers hurried about in groups, uneasily checking over their shoulders for danger, it was clear he wasn't the only one to think so.

"We'll have to move you guys to Diego Garcia ASAP," Lennox said immediately when he reappeared. "I don't know when, but very soon. This base is entirely compromised. We need to regroup somewhere safer."

But they really couldn't move that quickly. Diego Garcia wasn't ready to support the Autobots or their human counterparts. And at this moment in time, they had no idea whether Diego Garcia would be safer. Given the events of the past few hours, it was possible the Decepticons had it under observation already.

Optimus himself was reconsidering the move to Diego Garcia. It had been clearly demonstrated to them only hours ago that the Decepticons had been given new modifications that allowed them to both fly and swim—or perhaps teleportation, but surely they couldn't have had the technology for all of the mechs they witnessed there. The Autobots did not have those options, and if they chose to isolate themselves on an island they would be dependent upon their human allies for both transportation and defense. He made a note to discuss the issue with Prowl, Lennox and Keller as soon as possible.

In the meantime, it was evident that they needed more intel about their enemies, their goals and targets and where the Decepticons had established bases. Prowl and Epps had gotten the computer system in Hangar A back up and running, and checked to make sure that the data Jazz and Thundercracker had given them about their world's known Decepticon bases was entered correctly, so that it could be correlated against files from the CIA and NSA. He prayed some of it would match up. It was their best lead, no matter what Keller said about avoiding using it as fact. They had no facts, otherwise.

"Where are the refugees now?" Optimus asked. He knew none of them had been seriously injured, thankfully. He didn't want to have to face Jazz later with more regrets than he already had.

Prowl shook his helm. "They're in Hangar B again. It wasn't too badly damaged," he explained. "They're all right. Thundercracker evacuated the humans during the assault. Jazz and the others helped take down the other Decepticons and defended the base, and afterwards they did a lot of cleanup work, put out the fires. Their humans did first aid on NEST personnel." Prowl sighed.
"Devoid of their assistance, I estimate a twenty-two percent chance that we would have survived this event without losing multiple mechs and all human NEST personnel located on the base."

"We owe them our thanks, then," Optimus said quietly, looking out the remains of the wall to Hangar B, where the ten probably were sitting. He was especially glad that Jazz had gotten his weapons in the end. The saboteur certainly had his proof that they deserved weapons. It was shaming to think they needed them, but now they couldn't take the chance. Everyone was a target for the Decepticons. "And our apologies."

While the comtechs connected them to Keller, they all stopped talking. The calm that followed their hasty return was worse than chaos; it left them time to dwell on everything they didn't know—and all the questions they now had. When Epps finally sat down on the cement floor, all eyes and optics landed on him.

"What did you see?" Ironhide asked, the question probably on everyone's minds.

Epps, despite being a rational and calm man even during the fiercest of battles, shook his head and looked ill. "I—I don't even know, man," he said, voice wavering. "I thought it was an explosion, or some kind of debris, but… it was a mech." Epps peered up at them, confused. "He was on fire. Like legit, head to toe, on fire, even when he was in part of the water."

Ratchet stared back. "And he was… functional?" he prompted, sounding incredulous.

"He seemed fine, I don't know. It was hard to tell." Epps ran a hand over his face, exasperated. "But then he tore a hole in the side of the Stennis like… like it was made out of paper. The techs recorded the video feed—they're gonna load it into the computer, so you all can see it too."

"Do you really think it was the actual Fallen from the survivors' story?" Prowl asked, looking between Epps and Optimus. He was calmer than the rest of them facially and verbally, but his door wings' erratic movements betrayed his anxiety.

"We can't know for sure. We never saw him leave, but that doesn't mean anything," Lennox answered. His tone and expression were dark. "We never saw him arrive either."


They had much to worry about. The Fallen's purpose there, Megatron's resurrection, the return of the Decepticons—it was all overwhelming. They didn't have the time to wait and see what happened next, either. They had to anticipate another attack and possibly the outbreak of many battles, now that the Decepticons seemed to have gotten their forces in order once again. And they had very little time to discuss the issues with NEST, since their enemies had seemingly achieved their goals with both attacks.

There were so many unanswered questions. Optimus prayed they could get through the next few days without another disaster and that they could have the patience to endure it,

"What are we going to do now?" Keller asked the moment communications were established between DC and the base.

Optimus wished he had an answer that would alleviate the grim atmosphere, or give his desperate-looking friends something solid. He didn't have anything to say that would help, however. All he knew was that they couldn't just wait and see.

They couldn't count on NEST being enough anymore.
"…We need help," he finally said, looking back at the screen. "We cannot fight Megatron and his followers if they are regrouping in large quantities. We need the crews of the Hyperion and the Galaxus here."

Less than thirty hours ago, if any of them had said that, Keller would have shut them down harshly, as he had done for the last two years.

Now… Optimus saw the human on the television screen stare back at him, looking tired and older than ever. He didn't say anything at first, but Optimus knew he hadn't surprised Keller with this idea. It was the only logical course of action, and clearly Keller had already known this and made a decision.

"…Alright." Keller sat back away from the screen. "Get them here. Get them here ASAP, Prime."

"Will Earth be ready for them when they arrive?" Prowl asked, looking at the screen with a frown. "Two Autobot starships, either in orbit, or hidden on Mars, or the lunar surface, will not be missed by amateur astronomers, John. We will be found out either way."

"You leave the exposition to me. I need to speak with the President about this on all counts," Keller replied, shaking his head. "But get them to move faster anyway, Prime. We can't take any more chances. No more. We've lost too many today, we can't afford to risk this happening again."

The line was cut short, Keller citing the need to speak with the President and the Joint Chiefs. That left the NEST commanders standing in the remains of Hangar A, surrounded by the wreckage of what had been their communications center. The silence was deafening, at least until Optimus turned to look back at his human companions.

"Prime?" Lennox asked, taunt lines around his eyes.

It was a difficult situation, but not a difficult decision. There was only one option, really.

"…I am sending the message. Like Keller said, we cannot wait." Optimus stared back at all of his friends. "We cannot wait to make another mistake. We must treat this as though we are facing the worst case scenario." He didn't say what he was thinking, although he suspected that Ratchet and Prowl were both thinking it too, that given the timeline Jazz had told, it might already be too late for assistance from the Hyperion and Galaxus to make a difference.

The scenario they faced now was the same terrifying one that Jazz had warned them so desperately about. They had an edge, with these survivors' stories to go on, but that didn't mean they would succeed. The present day was already changed, but it could easily become the hellish future they had all been warned, in vain, about.

The message was sent quite like his last two, the first to encourage Autobot contact and the second to call for the Hyperion and Galaxus starships to head to Earth. They had told their comrades to essentially go slow, to give Earth authorities more time to prepare. Before, there were fears the Autobots would arrive too soon. Now, time was against them for the opposite reason.

He walked out of the hangar, Ratchet and Ironhide following him in silence. He stood out on the tarmac, away from the ruins of human vehicles, and stared up at the sky. The damaged electrical grid made it easier to see the dark and stars above them. Briefly, he thought he was seeing it like the humans described space to be; he felt incredibly alone and helpless beneath the vast blackness.

"This is Optimus Prime. I send this out to the commanders of the Hyperion and Galaxus, speaking to you as your leader." Optimus narrowed his optics as he looked out beyond his troops and their base,
which was in shambles. "The plan to arrive on Earth has not changed. However, I ask that both vessels and their crews forgo the previous timelines that the leaders of Earth gave us a deca-orn ago.

"We are in need of immediate aid. The Decepticons have returned and Earth cannot wait for our army to assemble," Optimus continued. He knew he sounded far too weary, but perhaps that would only give their allies all the more reason to move faster. "Hyperion—Galaxus—hurry. Optimus Prime, over and out."

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Well, Vortex thought, the last twenty-four hours could have gone better. Way, way better.

They were alive; that was clearly a good thing and Vortex wasn't going to complain. Kass hadn't even needed to patch up his shrapnel injuries, considering his self-repairs were working so much better now due to the amount of energon he was able to consume recently. Arcee had been a little less lucky, however. Her injuries had been more severe, beyond Kass' level of knowledge. She'd had to wait and be repaired when Ratchet returned to the base, but since the Autobot Hoist had been severely injured she'd still had to wait until Ratchet was finished with him. That's what they got for leaving non-fighters behind.

Vortex was grateful when Thundercracker returned with their four humans, though he felt relief more than happiness when he saw them.

Everything had gone wrong. Nearly everything, he amended his thought at the realization that while the US military had lost thousands of lives that day, they hadn't lost anyone from their team.

"Is it true?" Bluestreak asked the moment Jazz got back from a very short debriefing with Prime. None of them had ever seen the silver saboteur look so worn down. "Jazz, is it true that Megatron is alive?"

Jazz stared at all of them and looked more like his old self, the self that had been forced to endure an apocalyptic future with them. That was more troubling than anything.

"It's true," he said. He sat down next to them and sighed, the sound echoing in his frame. "They don't know how, but th' Fallen went down, an' Megatron came back up. And they don't know where they've gone now."

That had not been the news they had hoped for, or expected. Kass had to verbally calm Bluestreak down, who wanted nothing more than to charge back to where the Autobots were and ask Prime for a second opinion. It was like a nightmare, they all agreed, but they had to acknowledge that it was true.

This… was their world, all over again.

"What now?" Danny asked quietly. Vortex watched her silently as she lay curled up in Wildrider's hands, which were placed in his lap. Vortex would never say it out loud, but it was reassuring to see her thinking and speaking again.

"We don't know," Jazz said, sighing heavily. "We don't know anythin'."

"We know that we're fucked," Rachel said, blunt as ever. Her hair was still soaking wet from the shower she had taken to get out the dirt, leaves, and bits of metal that had covered them when they returned from the safety of the forest.
"No, we don't," Jazz replied immediately, shaking his helm. "We can't be sure of anything."

"Well, I know we're fucked," Rachel said. She met his exasperated look with an unimpressed glare. "Look: Megatron's back, that Fallen fucker is here, somewhere, and we just lost the Shard. They aren't telling any of us much, but even I can figure out that that was our best chance at winning against the Decepticons." She motioned with her hands, ticking off points as she went along.

"I agree," Wildrider said. He shrugged. "Ve are fucked."

Jazz's visor narrowed. "Shut up," he snapped. "I mean it. Stop talking that way." He looked at all of them and spoke firmly. "We are at war. Alla us." He caught Vortex's gaze and then looked at Arcee specifically. "We may not be Autobots, but we're survivors. This is our home, our Earth. Maybe not our time, but we have just as much at stake as th' Autobots do. Maybe more." Finally, he looked to Rachel, adding, "An' when yer at war, ya don't raise th' flag of defeat until ya have nothin' left."

"Inspiring," Rachel drawled, lying back on her cot with feigned ease. "So now what?"

That was the question of the night. Vortex didn't say much. There wasn't much to say that would be worth saying coming from him. Jazz did his best to fill them in on what was happening within the ranks of the Autobots and NEST, but they weren't blabbing to him either. None of them trusted the survivors, not even now. Fraggers.

Jazz remained sure that they had to just keep trusting NEST and their ten would be alright. Vortex didn't trust any of the Autobots, and was even less trusting of the humans, who seemed more interested in appealing to their frivolous legal system than they did to the actual welfare of the refugees. Luckily, NEST's attention had successfully been redirected to the real threat—the Decepticons—and Vortex found it easier to relax in the knowledge they were no longer NEST's main (potential) adversaries.

Then again, that had been an easy thing to deal with, compared to dealing with the harder, more frightening questions that the battle had left them with.

"Why?" Barns asked, desperate. "Why did he destroy it? It makes no sense!"

"Yer tellin' me," Jazz growled out, shaking his helm.

Vortex almost hadn't believed it when Thundercracker and the humans told him what they had seen. Soundwave, one of the most powerful Decepticons he knew of, had destroyed the one thing left in the universe that bore the power of Primus. It was illogical, unfathomable.

It made Vortex feel, in his spark, very uneasy.

"What would possess him to destroy such a valuable item?" Arcee continued. She looked heartbroken, a sentiment most of the mechs were sharing.

Jazz scowled. "More importantly, how did they bring Megatron back without it?" he demanded. "Was this just t' slap us in th' fraggin' face? Was it, 'Lookit what we can do without yer shard!'?"

"Well, unless we capture him, or maybe one of the Decepticon higher-ups, we won't know. It's not important," Thundercracker said, grimly. "What is important is what we do next."

Arcee frowned. "Which is?"

"Get ready for a fight," the jet replied. "If this world really is about to become the world we left behind, then guaranteed, things are going to get worse." He looked out the hangar bay door,
scowling. "And there is one large advantage that we have over every single other being here now."

"Oh?" Kass prompted.

"We know the worst-case scenario. We lived through it. And we know we are strong enough to survive again." Thundercracker peered down at them all and Vortex clenched his fists. "But we also know what can, what will happen if we lose. That… will make sure we won't stop trying to avoid it. We'll fight this."

Barns nodding slowly. "Because we don't want to see the Earth suffer the same Hell over again," he said in a quiet voice.

Vortex averted his gaze and didn't comment. He knew that if the time came and any army forced another battle upon him, he would defend himself and the others. But he couldn't say with an honest spark that he would fight with the intention to save the future. Not because he didn't want to—

Simply, he just couldn't believe that saving Earth from their horrid experiences was… possible.

That night, he didn't recharge at all. He stole glances at his sleeping friends and then stared out the demolished hangar doors at the night sky, where somewhere, out there, the Fallen lay in wait.

All over again.

Vortex shuddered.

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*Tranquility, Nevada
Two Days Later*

When Bumblebee dropped him off in his driveway, Sam could only pat the Autobot on his hood and tell him it was okay to either wait around, or go off if he had to. Then he turned and went inside without looking to see what Bumblebee decided to do. It didn't really matter anyway; Sam had told his mother he would stay for the weekend. His father was at work until later that evening, but Sam wasn't looking forward to seeing either parent.

He wasn't really interested in doing anything, honestly.

"What happened?" his mother demanded, her eyes huge as Sam lugged his bag through the living room. "I thought you were staying until the end of the month. Sam?"

"I, uh, decided to come back home," Sam muttered. He turned to head up the stairs, headache looming just beyond the base of his skull.

His mother paused, not following up after him. "Wait, what, did they kick you out?" she demanded, shocked.

"Decepticons," Sam said, voice cold. He shook his head and kept going up the stairs. "And even if it was, you know I can't tell you that, Mom. Please, just drop it."
"But if you can't tell me yes, does that mean by you telling me you can't tell me that it is a yes?" his mother called up, more panicked. Sam exhaled sharply and didn't bother to turn around. He didn't want to deal with anyone right now.

He hadn't wanted to leave the base—he felt like he'd abandoned the Autobots at the worst possible time. Mikaela had been the one to ask to go home, saying she wanted to get home to her father and just check in. It was clear to Sam that she had been rattled especially hard by the attack on the base; Ratchet had been teaching her how to mend energon lines before his team left on NEST-1, but hadn't gotten very far. During the attack, Hoist had almost been killed by Soundwave. When they returned to the base she had tried to help Wheeljack, but didn't know enough to be truly useful. The majority of the repairs had ended up having to wait for Ratchet anyway, which had scared her.

"I thought he was going to die," she said in a quiet voice as they drove back to Nevada. "Oh, God, Sam, I thought he was going to die, that Wheeljack couldn't save him, and I wasn't any help. I should have helped him, but I was useless. I was so scared, I couldn't even do the things Ratchet's taught me to do!"

"You're still a student," Sam said, rubbing her back, sympathetic. He had certainly felt useless.

"But that's the point of me being there!" she exclaimed, finally crying. "What good am I if the moment Ratchet isn't there and someone gets hurt, I freak out?"

"You did help," Sam quietly pointed out. "I saw you fixing small things, which gave Wheeljack the chance to focus on bigger issues. Just because you haven't learned to fix energon lines in combat situations doesn't mean you are useless." Sam carefully did not point out that while she at least was able to do something, Sam could only stand there in the shadows and watch, utterly useless.

His room was just as he had left it, with a full basket of dirty laundry in the corner and a large pile of books for his upcoming classes lying untouched on his desk. Sam dropped his bag onto his bed. The air was a bit stale smelling because the window wasn't open. He walked over to open the window over his desk. From there, he could see Bumblebee quietly parked on the gravel. Sam looked at his friend and sighed quietly to himself.

They… were in a lot of trouble.

Sam stood back away from the window, thinking over exactly what had happened. So much. So much—of everything.

Megatron was alive. Sam… Sam had been the one who had killed him. Sam hadn't expected to do it that day, but he did. He had killed that monster with his own hands, and he had never regretted it. He still didn't. But now, Megatron was alive.

"Don't think about it," Bumblebee had begged, as if he could sense the terror building up in Sam's gut. "We can't change what happened, but there's no sense in getting worked up. We'll fix this, Sam. Just have faith."

That was easier to hear and say than to actually believe, however. Sam felt that same twinge of fear appear again in his stomach as he stood there, going over the memories of the last forty-eight hours. The running, the gunfire and explosions…

What struck him most was the look on Optimus' face when the Autobots finally landed and the team reassembled in Hangar C, despite the missing wall. Optimus had looked worn down, tired—grieved. That hadn't made Sam feel better, and judging by the similar look of distress on Epps and Lennox's
faces, no one there was able to hold fast to Bumblebee's half-hearted optimism.

"Hold it together, Sam," he whispered, voice unnaturally loud in the large, empty room.

He tried to think—about the future. The bad one, the one they had prayed so hard wouldn't happen to them. He had been thinking about it for a while, ever since Barns had begged him to get Bumblebee to talk to Prime about the body (a wise warning given too late, of course). He didn't know too much about the details, but he had heard enough. Kass had told him that he had died at Mission City. Bumblebee had died there too, as well as Optimus, Ratchet, Epps...

Megatron had been killed in their Mission City too, but that had been by Optimus' hand, not Sam's. Sam, at the very beginning of learning about the time travelers, saw that as a good thing. The fact that Megatron had been killed in both worlds, that had to be a good thing. It meant that things were consistent.

But then, in a moment of clarity brought on by his discussion with Barns, Sam had realized that it wasn't a good thing. Because if Megatron had died in both timelines, and he was resurrected in the other world, then he could also be resurrected here. That was why he had taken Barns straight to Bumblebee, why he had been so insistent on 'Bee talking with Prime. Of course, it had already been too late, although they hadn't known it. Now, he was resurrected in this timeline... and...

Sam fought back a wave of nausea as he realized that now there were two major connections between their two timelines. Before, Sam had been relieved that the Mission City battles had been so different, even if their endings had been similar, with Megatron dying. He had thought those deviations meant that the future of his world would be different. Now, it was looking more and more as if his Mission City and its better casualty list didn't matter, wouldn't affect their destiny of an apocalyptic future.

Megatron had died and come back, along with Starscream, the Decepticon army, and that unknown Fallen mech—just as it had happened to Barns' world. All of it... was the same anyway.

Pushing his desk chair out of the way, Sam managed to stumble into his bathroom and reach the toilet before he threw up. It was a nervous gesture, but Sam felt his whole body violently react to the emotions coursing through him. He knew he should have just stopped, taken a breath to calm down, and just—stopped.

But how could he? Sam stared at the tiled floor, breathing heavily. Mikaela had once told him that their lives were on a rollercoaster. He had always replied that no, it was more like the lazy river ride—exciting at first, but with only the occasional rapids or waterfall to surprise and distract them from the amazing scenery around them. He'd felt that eventually, once they'd overcome all the things preventing them from joining NEST, things would speed up a little. He'd been so sheltered, so protected by the Autobots over the past year that he hadn't realized Mikaela was right.

They were definitely on a roller coaster. The quiet life they'd led over the past year and a half had been the slow ascent to the top of the first peak and they were finally at the top, tipping over, and Sam knew that the ride down would be fast—faster than anything they had experienced yet. There was no getting off and no stopping it.

This was their future now.
Our loveliest couple has a conversation and then Sam has friend problems.

A/Ns:
- "That Fallen fucker" is now the official designation of the Fallen in this story, at least in my mind. LOL. Thank you, Rachel...
He wasn't used to onlineing the morning after a disaster and not being in a different place. Whenever the drones had attacked, they'd move as quickly as possible, get as far away from the area of attack as they could, to lower their risk of running into another group of drones. Now, after surviving an attack by creatures perhaps even worse than the drones, they were waking up in the same place. The same fragging place as the attack—Vortex wondered whether he'd be able to keep it together, give one of his companions the chance to flip out first.

All of the base occupants were recovering from the incident, however, even the Autobots and their human allies. The grim faces and the quiet, reserved atmosphere hovering over them were almost satisfying. Vortex wanted to tell their "hosts" just how wrong they had been, and how right the survivors had been, over the case of Megatron's remains. The helicopter wasn't actually going to say anything, even though he knew it would rattle the Autobots' self-assurance wonderfully. He just didn't want to think about how close they had come to death themselves, he and his friends.

He had no idea what they were going to do next. As far as he could tell, the Autobots (and NEST) didn't have any kind of plan. From what Jazz had said the night before, it sounded like they were going to follow the data he and Thundercracker had given them and hope that the rest of their worlds' futures would match up, so they could have an advantage. Vortex wasn't a scientist and didn't know any more than the other mechs did about how dangerous or complex time traveling was, but he couldn't shake the feeling it wouldn't be as simple as they were hoping it would be.

"How is following a different world's future going to help us out?" Kass had asked in similar frustration. "Sure, there are similarities, all the bad ones, but things are still different. We could just be going on a wild goose chase, hunting down all the inane details."

Vortex certainly didn't have answers, and without their Wheeljack there (his presence was missed more than ever now) to give a logical explanation, they only had their own guesses and Jazz's half-hearted optimism in the Autobots' intervention to go on. It wasn't comforting.

So the day after Soundwave's assault on the base Vortex decided he wasn't going to think about the future, at least that side of it. He was sick of trying to wrap his mind around their presence here to start with. He decided to just... talk. With someone worth talking to.
He found the object of his interest sitting outside of their designated hanger, looking quite out of place in the sunlit alcove. Rachel had always had a pallid complexion, her light colored hair washing her out, making her look pasty. Now, although she was still far lighter skinned than any other human he had seen on base, her appearance had changed. Gone was the anemic paleness and in its place was a fair-skinned complexion with color in the cheeks and shining hair that was being streaked by the sun. The dingy clothing and cold light of their apocalyptic Europe had been replaced with blue jeans, colorful shirts and warm sunshine. While he was sure the NEST humans were pleased with the changes, for him the bright colors were shocking to see on her still-thin frame.

"Rachel," he said, stepping closer.

The human looked up at him, eyes squinted slightly from the sunlight. "Hey." She sounded hoarse again. And her face seemed paler than it had just the day before. But it was the expression on her face that reminded him of the girl he'd met years ago.

Vortex quietly stopped near her and stared downward. "Why are you out here?" he prompted. Rachel normally avoided the outside of the hanger alone, probably because she was paranoid of NEST. Barns might have been the most intelligent out of their four, but Rachel had always had the most common sense.

"I wanted some sun," Rachel replied. She closed her eyes again and leaned against her knees. "It's too dark in the hanger."

She wasn't afraid of the dark; that was Danny's job. Vortex rumbled lowly as he watched the human femme sit quietly on the ground, seemingly ignoring the world around her.

But he knew her—he knew her better than any of those NEST soldiers, or the Autobots, and perhaps better than many of their companions. He might not have been with her for as long as Jazz or Thundercracker, but Vortex knew Rachel, just as she knew him. Their worst qualities were all too similar.

"You're upset," he said, causing her to open her eyes again to look at him.

"I'm always upset," she replied, arching an eyebrow.

Vortex snorted. "I know." Gently—ever-so-gently—he nudged her side with the tip of his pede. She barely flinched. "Seriously, what's wrong?"

"Playing the courteous boyfriend now, are you?" Rachel suddenly snapped, edging away. "Jazz'll love that."

Vortex just glared at her harshness. "Seriously," he growled back, crouching over her, knowing the closeness would make her feel claustrophobic.

Rachel stayed where she was though, fearlessly. Or maybe just fearless of him. Vortex sat down properly next to her and waited as Rachel seemed to debate furiously with herself.

Slowly, she moved backwards, without looking at him. She leaned back against his leg and stared out at the airfield with a tense, clenched jaw.

"...I can't..."

Rachel made a strangled sound, as if she had tried to laugh. "I just can't believe it's happening all over again," she managed to say again, shaking her head. "This war."
Vortex stared at her silently, gauging the situation. He knew Rachel worried, perhaps more than most of them, about the what-ifs of the future. They had much to worry about. He normally would have thought it good that at least someone was thinking pessimistically besides himself, just to counteract the sometimes-suicidal optimism the others liked to dwell on.

He wasn't sure he liked hearing it from this human now, though; he didn't know why. He didn't want to think it was because of some sentimentality he had, that he just didn't want her to worry, or look so worn down, because that was… wrong.

"We'll get past it. We'll survive," he said, taking the position of the optimist, no matter how ill-suited to it he was. He let her lean closer. "We did the first time."

They had failed in many ways doing so, losing two of their companions, but the majority of them were still there. That had to count for something. They might lose more of each other… they might even lose the war again and ultimately Earth, but…

Vortex cupped his hand behind Rachel, silently praying it wouldn't come to that. Although he had long since acknowledged that Primus didn't seem to answer many of his prayers.

"And then what?" Rachel asked, her voice strained. She actually was upset about this, Vortex realized.

"What do you mean?" he asked, confused. If they survived, that was a good thing.

"Look at me. Look at you. And everyone else." Rachel stared up at him with a plaintive expression, blue eyes shining in a way even optics couldn't replicate. "We're not… we don't belong here, 'Tex."

Vortex frowned behind his mask, unsettled. "This is Earth. It's your home." Why was she talking like this?

"Not this Earth. Not with its video games, its—its convenience stores, or—or its countries," she spat. She clutched her head tightly with one hand, an agonized expression on her face. "I feel like we've landed on Mars more than Earth. I don't belong here."

"Yes, you do," he said firmly. He pulled her closer and glared slightly. He didn't understand this kind of pessimism at all. She was speaking nonsense. "If we do survive to that moment of trying to fit in, you'll be fine."

That wasn't a lie, but it wasn't actually the truth. How would he know anything about this world, anymore than this human did? Thinking they would last long enough to find out what an apocalypse-free Earth was like… like flying in freezing fog—foolish. But Rachel was only digging herself into a miserable state of mind, convincing herself that even if they accomplished the best possible outcome, they would still be doomed.

Rachel tucked her head toward her knees. At first, Vortex thought she might tell him off, or broodily ignore him.

He wasn't expecting to hear a faint sniff.

"I… don't know… how to be anyone else," Rachel said, more in a mutter than a coherent sentence. Vortex froze.

"What do you mean?" he asked, wary.

"I'm a survivor. I… am a survivor," she replied, shaking her head slowly. She lifted it up, staring out
into the distance. Vortex had never seen her look so vulnerable. So human. "I… can't not be… that anymore. Otherwise… I… don't know who I am. I'm… no one here. I don't know how to be someone else… in a world like this."

Vortex knew he was the last person who should be having this conversation with her. Primus knew he was an unsympathetic bastard to everyone. But then he realized that no one else would have been suitable—no one else could relate to her as well as he could. "…I know what you mean," he muttered, looking up as well. He didn't know what it was like to be an alien on his own home world, because he had never had one. He certainly knew what it felt like to be an alien here, though. "You're strong. You can move past the strangeness of this world. If anyone can adapt, it's you."

Rachel choked on a laugh. "Ha… you're such a flatterer," she said, chuckling. She uncoiled a bit and wiped at her face. Vortex averted his gaze.

She curled up against his hand and Vortex wished they could have something more than just… just a pathetic imitation of touch. She needed to be held, not cradled, in arms that matched her own. She needed warmth, not metal. But she still turned to him and let her terribly fragile body cling to his deadly limbs.

Somehow, that made Vortex feel better. Just slightly.

"It will get better," he said, visor glowing softly. He wasn't sure if he believed that himself, but he knew the others liked to hear it. They certainly said it often enough to him.

Rachel sat up more, craning her neck to meet his gaze. She didn't have to say anything, with her eyes that dark; he knew she didn't believe him. Neither of them were naïve, like Bluestreak, or maybe how Danny once was. They knew… they knew their chances were bleak. They didn't have to point it out, though.

"I'm so freaking scared," she said, drawing closer to his hand again. She wasn't shaking, but her voice was. "I hate this."

Vortex could only let her cling to him, wishing he could do more. Rachel just hung there, clearly undeterred by the metal, and seemed perfectly happy to stay there for awhile. Vortex could feel the minute movements of her chest expanding with every breath she took, and if he trained his already heightened sensors closer, he could almost feel her heart beating.

He could have stayed like that forever, he realized. He didn't even care if that sounded pathetic. Vortex was tired of being alone. He was tired of being scared himself, of the larger picture that was constantly threatening to suffocate them all.

"You know what?" Rachel began, catching his attention. She didn't sit up though; she just kept hanging on his hand, looking tired. "I was thinking—"

She stopped when Vortex flinched; he couldn't help doing so when he heard people approaching. Looking to the left, he saw a group of soldiers walking closer. They had been talking amongst themselves casually and he hadn't noticed them moving closer, having put the sound of their conversation into the background. He did notice them when they stopped and noticed him, and then Rachel.

They stared in silence, but their expressions spoke volumes. Vortex felt a growl build up in his chestplates, feeling far more defensive than he should have. He shouldn't have had to defend himself from humans, of all creatures, nor should their judging stares have meant anything to him—
The burning of his spark wasn't easy to ignore. It was far too—too human—as a response, but he didn't care. Not now. He wanted to say something back to the humans for their rudeness, but he stopped himself short, knowing that it was hopeless.

He deserved such condescending looks. He wasn't one of their kind; he wasn't even one of their allies. Even if he did switch to the Autobots, none of the humans would trust him. More than that, he knew why they were glaring at him sitting there with Rachel. Briefly, he remembered the saying, monster in sheep's clothing. Somehow, that was quite applicable.

Vortex wasn't about to say anything, but of course, he didn't have to. Rachel saw the humans staring, and in quite her usual fashion, didn't give a shit.

"What are you looking at?" she snarled, standing upright. The soldiers quickly turned about face, perhaps feeling guilty for gawking, or maybe they were honestly afraid of her. She did have a reputation. "Get lost!"

Despite the fact that she was smaller than they were, and dreadfully thin, the soldiers apparently believed Rachel to be a proper threat, because they quickly kept walking, averting their eyes with embarrassed expressions. Rachel continued to glare at the departing figures, but Vortex looked down at her, watching her carefully.

Somehow… this wasn't a good thing, regardless of his feelings. Vortex felt a twinge of unease filter into his spark and all the good feelings he'd had while sitting there with Rachel were replaced by irrational worry, for something much different than Decepticons or drones.

"Rachel…" he began, trying to keep her from causing another fight. He'd love to get into a brawl, but he knew it wasn't the best time to test their luck with their hosts' patience. He wasn't even that sure he'd be able to kill a human; it was a disturbing concept to him now.

Rachel turned and scowled at him. "What?"

Vortex withheld a sigh and moved his hand away from her, opting to keep it in the air out of reach. "You should probably stay away from me like this." As long as the humans were watching, at least. They would never, ever understand.

A series of emotions passed over her face. Rachel glared up at the mech, struggling between anger and simple disappointment, before settling, of course, on anger. "I thought you wanted me," she challenged, stepping closer.

What a thing to say. Vortex braced himself. "…Yeah, but…" He averted his gaze somewhere above her head and cycled air forcefully through his vents. "We already have enough stigmas attached to us. Don't get lumped in with me, 'Rider, or TC."

Because he knew—he knew, even if Jazz kept saying otherwise—that the humans would never trust the three of them. Maybe the humans would have a chance. Maybe the Autobots could rejoin their old team and find a home on Earth. Rachel could have a normal life, like she was supposed to have had without this war ruining Earth for her people. But she wouldn't if her own kind labeled her as someone who associated with Vortex.

Vortex and the other ex-Decepticons had no home, outside of the intangible one they tried to pretend existed between their ten persons. No matter how much they wanted to pretend—it would never be a replacement for reality, especially not in a world like this.

She gestured at herself, voice cracking just slightly. "I'm a human. I can do what I want with my feelings. Fuck them if they stare, or freak out."

He narrowed his visor. "I don't want you hurt by …this." Whatever the frag this was; they were barely a couple and it wasn't like they could actually become one either. That didn't mean Rachel would be safe from persecution because of what they actually wanted. Humans were a judgmental race.

"Hurt?" she repeated, incredulous. She smiled nastily. "Vortex—I've been hurt by everything the universe could possibly throw at me." She stood back a little and clenched her fists. "I'm tired of it. I'm tired of being afraid of waking up alone. Now more than ever."

Taking a deep breath, she appeared to be holding back a fierce torrent of emotion and commentary, which was a testament to how much she had grown since the first time Vortex had met her. She still carried the same baggage she'd had as a young teen, however; she had the same grief and the same pain, perhaps worse, to deal with.

"I'm sick of losing the people I care about," she said, voice tight. She didn't look back at him.

Vortex watched her and felt his own form of grief combat with that sense of wariness of being seen. He didn't want her to be hurt, but his spark, in the end, was far too selfish.

"Me, too," he said quietly. He put his hand back down and let her lean against it again. He didn't care if someone saw. He just didn't care.

Rachel placed her hand over her face for a moment, frame taut with exhaustion and emotion. "…What are we going to do, 'Tex?" she asked, in barely a whisper. "What are we going to do?"

Whether she meant them, the future, or just life in general, Vortex wasn't sure. "I don't know. I just don't know," he replied, shaking his helm. Everything was just one ugly, cloudy mess.

"…You do mean something to me, Vortex," she said softly. She shook her head slowly as she removed her hand. "Don't forget that. Don't let them make you forget it."

Vortex wasn't sure anyone would be able to do that. He had fought it for years, endured pointless and dramatic overreactions from Thundercracker and Jazz, and gone through enough inner reflection to make more than certain of his own feelings. He was more hesitant to believe she would return those feelings further along in time, but to see her become so defensive and so adamant about him not giving up now…

It gave him hope.

"What were you going to tell me?" he asked, breaking the silence in an attempt to lighten the darkness settling over them both.

"Huh?" Rachel asked, honestly confused as she peered up at him. "Oh!" Suddenly, the femme made a comical face, embarrassed. ". . . I forgot."

Vortex stared at her and his visor narrowed just a little. Rachel stared back, at first with a "poker" face that Barns said she mimicked from Jazz, but it never lasted as long as the silver mech's. Unwillingly, Rachel started grinning back, laughter making her shake silently.

"Seriously," she said, now laughing louder. Vortex just sighed, heavier than necessary, and shook his helm with mock disdain. She laughed louder and slapped his hand.
Behind his mask, Vortex smiled back and allowed himself to chuckle lowly. He felt relieved doing so.

He would take these kinds of moments whenever he could without complaint; if this was what it took to stay sane… it could be worse.

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Tranquility, Nevada

Time in Tranquility passed by slowly when Bumblebee wasn't there with him. Sam had thought the worst moments of boredom and restlessness came from those days, or long weeks, when his guardian had been forced to go back alone to NEST. He hadn't prayed for more Decepticons to come back, of course, but having something going on that was large enough to include Sam, thus including him into NEST's activities, had always been something he had looked forward to.

He had never imagined, however, that having the Decepticons come back, so harshly and suddenly, would not make time speed up. Instead, it slowed down—far, far slower than the peaceful times had seemed to do.

It was getting closer and closer to the end of August, even as the days dragged on at a snail's pace. Sam spent the days avoiding his parents' questions and his nights lying awake on his bed, contemplating… everything. The timelessness caused each of his worries to be magnified inside his mind and there was no reprieve from them. Decepticons might have caused a stir loud enough to make Sam need to have Bumblebee nearby, but all he was able to do was sit around.

And wait.

Sam was waiting—for what, he wasn't sure yet. Another attack, a full-out invasion, mankind to discover the truth—something. Something big, terrifying, and completely out of his control.

Mikaela usually told him to stop worrying, even if she was the one who looked like she hadn't slept in a few days. She had thrown herself into her work as a mechanic at her father's shop (probably her version of studying), but Sam saw how jittery she was. She kept looking at the windows, or down the street, when she thought he or Bumblebee wouldn't notice. Sam did notice, because he was doing the same thing.

Today, Sam was alone, because Bumblebee had gone out to refuel (essentially using solar power, but Sam wasn't going to ask the details of it) somewhere outside of town. His parents had gone out to look for a new bathroom set, not quite oblivious, but understanding that he couldn't or wouldn't talk about what was bothering him, and that it was best to just let him be for a while. Mikaela had offered to come over, but Sam had told her not to bother, since he had to start packing for Stanford.

Stanford.

Sam's mind, already stuffed with other terms like Decepticon and alien and war, had stumbled over that word, when his mother had yelled at him that morning about not packing at all for the trip to California. He had almost forgotten about that one last sliver of normalcy he had allowed himself to adopt, even though he would have rather skipped the college and gone straight into working for NEST. Sam had actually been looking forward a little to the freedom that would accompany the move to the illustrious university, when he was trying to convince himself of the merits of going to school at all. A few short, ordinary years there and he would be able to go on with his spectacularly unordinary life.
Now… Sam stared at the first of his empty suitcases blankly, as he considered his situation. Now, things had changed again. His mother couldn't know the details, nor could his father, because they were entwined with larger secrets, dangerous secrets.

They didn't know he probably wasn't going to be able to go to college.

Sam wasn't an idiot. He had the social skills of a fifth grader, as Mikaela lovingly pointed out, but he had gotten into an Ivy League school after all. He had managed to defeat Megatron once, though he freely admitted that had been mostly luck. He had outlived a lot of dangerous situations though, so it wasn't just book smarts. He might not have been a soldier or a politician, but he knew about this war, about the people in it, and he knew what to expect.

For that reason, Sam couldn't finish packing his bags. He didn't care if his mother got upset later, even though he couldn't explain why to her.

The gesture was empty and hopeless, he realized; packing his life away to move on to college wasn't a step toward a bright future for him. For all he knew, Starscream was going to bomb his house in an hour. He could walk down the street in California and get wrapped up in another attack. Hell, things could go so badly that the survivors' stories about the 2020s would become real and Stanford wouldn't even be there anymore.

As much as Sam wanted to believe in Bumblebee's earnest optimism… it was hard to ignore the fear of, what if it is too late?

What if he couldn't go? What if something happened and the war broke out all over—would it even matter then, to pack up now? Was doing anything, like going to college or planning for a future with Mikaela and the Autobots, even worth his time?

Sam knew he was being over dramatic, but the last few days of nothingness were beginning get under his skin. He left his bags upstairs and rushed down to the living room, desperate to find something to distract himself with. Movies, television, sports and books seemed like useless endeavors now. How could he watch TV with an apocalypse hanging overhead?

Food. Food worked most times. Sam walked—or sped-walked—into the kitchen and hoped he could find something that would calm his nerves. His panic attacks were beginning to drive him literally crazy; he wasn't sure if he could stave them off in front of his friends, or God forbid, in a classroom. He had to stop thinking negatively, as Bumblebee told him; Sam had to find reasons to be happy.

His family was okay. His girlfriend was okay. He was okay. The US had lost an aircraft carrier, and a lot of people, but save for the close call with Hoist and the death of those four human NEST soldiers, no one he knew directly had been affected. The US military was still standing, NEST was still operational. The Autobots were okay. Hell, it could have gone really bad over the Atlantic, Sam reasoned; it could be much worse.

Sam found himself standing in front of the refrigerator, staring down at the various, unimportant contents, trying to focus on those good things. They might have been little things, on the scale of a cosmic war, but they were still good. He still had good in his life—

"Sam?"

Freezing, he almost screamed. Almost. He managed not to, thankfully, and turned around swiftly to see who had spoken. He had thought he had been alone, but apparently, he wasn't.

Miles Lancaster, wearing his usual attire of t-shirt and shorts, was peering in through the screen door...
on the side of kitchen. He hadn't knocked, because it was Miles; Miles had practically lived at the Witwicky house for most of their mutual lives. His hairstyle hadn't changed, neither had his wardrobe, awkward shuffling or flushed face. Sam gaped at his friend and was astonished when he realized he had almost not recognized the other man.

…Maybe he had been spending too many days away from his normal life.

"Miles!" Sam exclaimed, smiling. He closed the fridge door and walked over as Miles slunk inside. "Hey, man, what are you doing here?"

Despite obviously looking for Sam, Miles didn't look happy. "Waiting for you to show up, finally," he said, his bitterness surprising. "Sam, where the hell have you been?"

Sam hesitated, only because he had not had to lie to anyone about his disappearances in months. "My internship," he said, knowing he sounded awkward. He cleared his throat and leaned against the kitchen island. "You know. I told you about it in June."

"Sure," Miles drawled, leaning further down on the other counter. He was glaring now; Sam could see a tangent growing behind his blue eyes. "You said we were going to hang out last week."

"I…" Sam stared, mind reeling. Did he? Oh, crap, he did. Weeks ago. But the last two weeks, he had been at— "Oh, God, sorry, Miles," he stammered. "I—I keep getting weird hours and—"

"Sam, what's going on?" Miles interrupted again, rant subsiding for an equally lethal dose of concern. "Why aren't you home anymore?"

"I just said—," Sam began, trying to stay on top of this, because he wasn't about to start screwing this part of his life, too.

"No, I call bullshit. I call mondo-bullshit on this, Sam!" Miles exclaimed, cutting him off. He gestured wildly in exasperation. "You didn't mention this at all until June and then you're off to California every other day like it's working down at Walmart or something!"

Sam fought the urge to glare. He understood his friend's frustration, but it wasn't Sam's fault.

"I'm sorry, Miles, for having initiative," he replied dryly. He grabbed a cup from the sink, intent on ignoring Miles' behavior in order to keep Miles from freaking out more.

Miles sent him a look, "Oh, shut up, man, I know you! You are like, the person with the least initiative, next to me," he snapped. "Ever since you got that new car, you've been driving around to far off places left and right. You're a freaking nomad anymore."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Miles, I got the car two years ago." Inwardly, he felt a twinge of panic as Miles edged closer to an area Sam was not comfortable dealing with. Keeping the Autobots a secret was more important than, well, almost anything else in his life.

"Exactly! It's like—it's like you've been body snatched, man!" Miles exclaimed, gesturing wildly again. He suddenly glared. "Or at least your manhood has!"

"Excuse me? !" Sam sputtered, almost dropping his glass straight down on the floor.

Miles crossed his arms resolutely. "You heard me," he said. "Her and that car, Sam. Mikaela. Jock concubine who stole your soul."

All at once, the urge to be nice to his friend vanished. "Shut the hell up. Don't talk about her like
that," Sam said, not caring if he seemed angry. No one insulted his girlfriend. Even if she wasn't his girlfriend, Mikaela was still better than that. "Mikaela—Mikaela is probably the best person I have ever met. You don't know her, at all, so don't judge her like you know what she's like."

"Maybe I'd know what she's like if you know, we actually hung out!" Miles shot back. He was just as angry, if not more so. "No, you two go on 'internship trips' together and leave me behind here like yesterday's news!"

Sam bit his tongue in an effort not to say the stupid, hurtful things he wanted to say. He wanted to yell right back and accuse Miles of being stubborn, or tell him that he didn't understand. But that wasn't fair to Miles; Sam was keeping secrets. Having this thrown in his face, however, was painful.

"Miles, I know I've been a shitty friend lately, but could you at least consider that I'm actually busy? That I'm trying—I'm trying to make a future for myself?" Sam replied, trying to salvage the situation. He ran his hand over his face. "There are more important things going on in the world than if we hang out and play freaking Xbox!"

Miles glared. "Oh, so. Great. Your best friend isn't important. Nice, Sam. I feel so loved."

"Jesus, Miles, look," Sam started, stopping himself again. He exhaled noisily and fixed Miles with a stern look. "I'm sorry. I really, really am, but I wouldn't have dropped everything else in my life unless it was really, really important, okay? That includes you, my mom, my dad—the only reason Mikaela is still around so much is because she's doing this job, too." Sam hesitated, unnerved by how true that statement was. "I… I probably would have left her behind too, if she wasn't."

What was this doing to him? Sam felt lightheaded at that revelation. How could he seriously be giving up his best friend, potentially his education, his girlfriend, even his own life—for what? Aliens? A war?

God. Sam clenched his fists against the tremor building up in his limbs as he grabbed the iced tea jug from the fridge.

Miles had crept closer and crossed his arms against his chest as Sam messily poured himself a drink. "Then why can't I join, too?" the blond man asked, desperate.

"Because you missed the sign up," Sam said immediately. The half-joke fell flat, so Sam just rolled his eyes. "Miles, it's a really classified government job. We got in after we met some people at that reimbursement meeting, you know, for my car."

They had to come up with a series of lies to excuse, well, a lot of stuff that had happened in 2007. Bumblebee's new look, Sam and Mikaela's abrupt going out, and the neighbors' reports that Feds had been all over Sam's house had to be handled. Sam knew a lot of the lies were flimsy, but he had just gone with what the now defunct-Sector 7 people had told him to say.

"You mean the cover up for Mission City," Miles replied shortly. Sam opened his mouth to counter that verydangerousstatement, but Miles cut him off with an irritated wave of the hand. "Awww, man, don't give me that look. I know you saw more than just a bunch of fireworks. I know the government doesn't want us to know who bombed us."

Sam closed his eyes. Took a breath. And then opened them again. "Miles…" he began, fixing his best friend with a look. "You are freaking annoying, did you know that?" He regretted fiercely the day he had given Miles a copy of NEXUS magazine years ago.

Miles gestured at his head, triumphant. "But I figure things out. Just like I figured out that you're
hiding things from me," he said haughtily. That glee disappeared so fast, it was almost creepy. Miles instead looked at Sam, despairingly. "Look, I can respect that you gotta watch your ass from the Feds, but I'm your best friend. Aren't I? If you can't turn to me and tell me what's going on in your life, who can you trust?"

That sort of honesty was more than Sam could deal with. That kind of accusation was more than he could handle, too. Sam stared at Miles, at a loss.

What could he even say? What could he possibly do, except lie to his best friend, for the umpteenth time?

"...Miles..." he tried to say, failing. There was nothing... "I...I can't..."

It wasn't fair.

Sam looked at the iced tea jug and contemplated how to salvage the situation, perhaps distracting Miles with something less controversial. He was saved from having to speak when an unsettling familiar ringtone started to blare from his jacket pocket.

Fumbling, he tugged the cell phone out and he fought back a wave of nauseous fear when he saw that the caller I.D. read Bee. Sam looked up at Miles, who stared back with suspicion, and Sam prayed this wasn't what he was afraid it was.

The second he brought up the phone to ask what was wrong, Bumblebee's hurried voice filled his ear:

"Sam, we have to leave."

"What, why?" Sam asked, shocked. He turned away from Miles and clutched the phone to his ear with both hands. He tried to lower his voice, but his nervous high pitch kept breaking through. "Wait, where are you?"

Bumblebee sounded rushed, but almost too calm. "Picking Mikaela up," he said. There were no background sounds, because he was speaking through his radio over the cell phone lines. "Optimus asked me to retrieve both of you."

Everything was moving far too quickly. "Wh-wait, Bee, hold on a sec," Sam said, trying to keep up. "I-I thought you said you—I thought we weren't allowed back yet." What was wrong? Why was this happening now?

The Autobot hesitated, probably trying to decide whether or not it was safe to tell Sam the truth. "Sam, there has been Decepticon movement detected in Mexico and near the Texas border. We must assume the worst, and because you and Mikaela are considered active targets of revenge, you can't stay in Tranquility alone," Bumblebee said, sounding grim. "I'm sorry, but I need to be on base."

Sam swallowed, but his throat had gone dry. "I told my dad I was staying until I had to go to Stanford." Oh, God, school.

"I know. I know, Sam. I'm so sorry. Please," Bumblebee said, sounding severely upset. "I can't lose you, or Mikaela."

Because Sam—Sam was Sam Witwicky, the boy who killed Megatron. He was one of the only civilians who knew about NEST, who knew the Autobots, who had had any affect on the Decepticons or this war at all. Sam Witwicky was a target, whether that was fair or not.
Sam couldn't let this affect his parents, or Miles, or Tranquility at large. He couldn't stay.

"I… No, Bee, I get it." Sam ran a hand over his face, leaving it there as his mind reveled in a newfound panic. "It's fine. Let me get my stuff. I'll be ready in fifteen minutes, okay?"

He hung up and slowly put the phone back in his pocket. Feeling numb, Sam moved away from the counter and set his eyes on the stairs.

Perhaps he would have to do his packing, for an entirely different reason than his mother yelling at him.

"Where are you going now?" Miles exclaimed as he saw him move.

"My… my internship leader," Sam stammered. He walked past Miles on wobbly legs. "He needs me and 'Kaela back." Oh, God, oh, God…

"For what?!" Miles demanded, walking quickly after him.

Sam stumbled into the living room, trying not to panic, again. "For—for internship stuff! Jesus, Miles!" Why couldn't the other teen just drop it?! Whether it was his tone, or the fact Sam was clearly waiting for him to get lost, Miles flinched as if he had been struck. The wounded look was rapidly replaced by angry betrayal. "Sorry!" Miles snapped. "Sorry for freaking caring about you, Sam. I'll try to care less in the future."

"There's nothing to worry about! I'm fine!" Sam said. He gestured at his chest, feeling the pathetic walls holding up his hysteria begin to cave. "Look at me, I'm the picture of health! Nothing wrong with me at all!"

Miles scoffed. "You look like you're about to head into the apocalypse empty handed," he said. "Oh, no, wait, you'll have an evil jock concubine with you instead of your trusty sidekick and best friend!"

"Miles!" Sam shouted, gaping in shock. He had no words—no words at all. "Sh-shut the hell up!"

Turning even redder than usual, Miles threw his hands up, exasperated. "Fine!" he snapped. He started to move backwards, betrayal stronger than ever in his expression. "Have fun at Stanford! Without me!"

Sam watched as Miles stormed back out into the kitchen. The screen door slammed loudly and Sam flinched, the sound echoing louder across the house than it should have.

Bumblebee would get there soon. He had to start getting ready, get moving. Sam just tried to keep breathing as he stood there, alone.

Why was this happening?

He'd made a choice, that's why. Sam had chosen this. He had picked his fate on his own, though it was hardly a fate he would have chosen if he had never heard of the Transformers or had met Bumblebee. Living without the Autobots was an impossible choice, now, because Sam didn't have a choice. Even if he went to Optimus and told him that he didn't want to be a part of this world anymore, Sam would have to stay with Bumblebee anyway, because of the Decepticons.

He… had no way out. Not anymore. Sam wondered if he ever had.

Ten minutes later, he was sitting out on his porch with a poorly put together bag, waiting. He had
picked up his phone twice, to text his mother, but each time, he had put the phone back down. Sam Witwicky might have saved the world once, but he was still a coward.

Looking up, Sam gazed at the mockingly bright sky above and sighed.

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End

Chapter 20

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Let's go to Mexico, guys.

A/Ns:
-Why the Vortex and Rachel spotlight now? Because this is actually the most optimistic scene we'll be having in the next few chapters. ;)
-I loved Miles! I won't have Sam abandon him as callously as Bay did. They have a bro-code, after all! (I promise, he does have a larger role in this.)
-NEXUS Magazine – a conspiracy theory magazine. Miles would totally be a conspiracy theorist (or at least, he is in this story).
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

The Autobots head south to investigate a potential Decepticon threat. What they find there, or rather what occurs there, changes the game again. Completely. Thanks again, Shantastic!

The two week hiatus begins today, so expect no new Fallout:Apocalypse chapters until January 25. However, there will be a Jazz/TC one-shot uploaded on Friday for your troubles.

Um. D: Sorry again.

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Prowl entered the hangar late. He had been working with several of the other human officers organize the reconstruction of the security bunker, so that had made it difficult to just drop his work when Optimus called him in. Then again, Prowl had already been aware of the situation and the cause of the sit-rep to begin with, so haste wasn't necessary.

He had, however, uploaded a team list, along with fourteen different possible plans for Optimus to evaluate. This would not become another incident like the one they'd had last week. They would not make the same mistakes; Prowl would make sure of that.

When he walked in, he saw that most of the Autobots and NEST higher ups were already there, looking ready to go. Judging from Sideswipe's eager expression and Ratchet's grim one, all of them had already heard the basic situation, but all eyes and optics fell to Major Lennox when he finally got there.

"What's the story, Billy?" Sideswipe asked the human, chipper. Jolt snickered unhelpfully.

"Call me that again and I'm going to have Ratchet turn you into a toaster. I heard the stories, so I know he can do it," Lennox threatened without missing a beat. Prowl smiled to himself over the familiarity. Lennox continued, "The radar images show distinct Cybertronian movement and energy signatures in the Sonoran Desert region, north of Puerto Penasco. We have a short time window granted by Mexican authorities. The story is that we're looking for a missing flight test vehicle that landed in the Gulf."

"But we're looking on the adjacent land," Epps added, looking uncomfortable. "We gotta be quiet and quick about this. We do not need more international relation problems."

Hound and Jolt shared a look. "As if we don't already have interspecies ones," Jolt muttered. Prowl
just sighed.

Lennox got down to business in his usual brisk manner. "Alright, I want a small team. We have to operate under the radar of the locals, got it?" he said, looking out at his audience. He looked dreadfully tired, the past few days of dealing with the aftermath of the attack on the Plumas base had been emotionally and physically taxing, and the reconstruction had been so demanding that Lennox had only slept a few hours since their return from the coast. "Optimus, Ratchet, Sunny, and Hound, you're up."

"Wait, why does Sunny get to go?" Sideswipe complained loudly.

"My name isn't Sunny!" Sunstreaker snarled from somewhere beyond the other mechs.

"Because it doesn't make sense to bring both of you. Sideswipe and Ironhide will hold the fort down here under Prowl's command," Lennox said, carefully skipping over the awkward topic of why they were leaving muscle behind at their supposedly-secure base. Paranoia was just another symptom of the Decepticons' attack. "Epps, you're staying, too. We need to keep the repairs moving forward."

"Gotcha," the other human called back, shaking his head. He motioned at the dark blue 'Bot beside him. "Come on, Jolt. Me and you got a date with power tools."

The Autobot sighed dramatically and walked after Epps with a defeated posture. "A waste of my skills, honestly," he said, voice drifting out of audio range.

"NEST-1 is being prepped to leave right now. The choppers will be ready to transport you all to Amedee in twenty minutes, so let's get ready to go!" Lennox called out, which got the rest of them moving.

Optimus had been standing next to Prowl the whole time. Both looked up when Ratchet stepped forward, giving Prime a hard look. "Do you think it's anything of consequence, Prime?" he asked.

"I don't know. We can't let it slide, on the off chance this is a Decepticon base," Optimus replied, shaking his helm. He caught Prowl's optics briefly before looking back to the medic. "If Jazz's warnings and data are accurate, the Decepticons are going to be forming an energon cache in the desert there. It's too dangerous a situation to ignore."

Ratchet didn't look any happier than the rest of them, but he nodded. "True."

It was true, but still dangerous. Keller had been right to warn them about assuming anything about the future or the present coinciding. But if it was a real cache, it had to be destroyed or appropriated, or they would be giving their enemies a large advantage too close to home.

"Prowl, you going to be okay here?" Lennox asked, peering up at the tactician.

Okay was a relative term. "Yes," Prowl replied, nodding. He looked around the hangar, observing their allies. They would be alright. "We have Sideswipe and Ironhide with us, as well as Jolt and Hound, if things get dangerous here. I doubt they will. There is no logical reason for them to attack this base, nothing to be gained, and certainly they know we will be on full alert now. It is highly unlikely that the Decepticons would return to this location with a frontal assault. Based on past Decepticon actions, I calculate a seventy-two percent chance the Decepticons will continue to employ guerrilla style hit-and-run attacks on future targets until they have a much larger force here. This correlates with what Jazz has told us of the Decepticon behavior in his time as well."

Lennox shuddered and started to turn away. "Just the fact that they could come back irks me," he muttered. Then, motioning above his head, he caroled the departing team members with him.
"Alright, everyone get moving…"

Prowl watched from the sidelines as their allies got organized and prepared for this next move. By rights, he should have gone with them to make sure their plan succeeded. They had to remain undetected by civilians and also keep their cover with the Mexican forces about the fake aircraft recovery. He prayed they did find something, hopefully something small, that would indicate that the information Jazz and Thundercracker had given them was applicable here too. It was the only advantage they had at this point.

"Hey, Prowl?" someone asked behind him. It was a familiar, albeit unexpected voice.

"Sunstreaker," he replied calmly, turning around.

He was surprised to see how equally guarded the yellow Transformer was. "Do those Neutrals still have their weapons?" Sunstreaker asked, a trace of bitterness to his tone.

Prowl hesitated. "…Yes," he replied, reluctantly. He wasn't sure why it mattered to the other mech; it wasn't much of a secret, regardless. "It seems prudent to allow at least Thundercracker and Jazz that luxury, in light of the attacks."

"Don't trust them," Sunstreaker said, shocking the other mech. "I don't care how you feel about Jazz, but don't let that emotion influence your plans."

Sunstreaker was not the type to bring up personal matters unless he felt it was of crucial importance. The statement was likely made in good will, because unlike many others he had a cordial relationship with Sunstreaker, but it still stung, and Prowl fought the urge to glare. "Since when do you tell me how to do my job, Sunstreaker?" he asked, knowing he sounded cold.

All at once, the calm façade on Sunstreaker's face was replaced with his usual defensive, volatile one. "I'm concerned," he snarled. He stepped backwards, hands in the air in a mocking Cybertronian gesture of submissiveness. "Never mind. Forget it, sir."

Prowl watched as the yellow Lamborghini stomped off after the NEST-1 squad and frowned. According to his fellow Autobots his relationship with the twins was something of legend, though he was sure they spoke in jest (even if it was a joke he didn't understand). His role had long ago made him the arbiter of justice within the Autobot ranks, which meant he was constantly reprimanding the twins for thoughtless mischief, insolence and occasionally for aggression. Somehow, over what felt like vorns spent lecturing and disciplining the two and over a megavorn spent working side-by-side on the Galaxus and in various forward emplacements, they had worked their way up from irritants to colleagues.

Before operation AT-906, he would have said that Jazz was the person he was closest to, his best friend. After he'd lost Jazz to Megatron, the twins had rallied around him. Sideswipe had gone out of his way to make sure Prowl smiled frequently and Sunstreaker had asked for a role change so that he could help with day-to-day administration of the Galaxus and keep an eye on Prowl. Prowl suddenly realized that they had become more than just colleagues in the last few years. In fact, they were the most important people in his life now that he had lost Jazz. He wondered if they thought the same of him. He wondered why he even thought that mattered.

Irrelevant. Prowl walked out of the hangar, intent on returning to the communications center to continue with the rebuilding process. He had work to do and none of it had to do with the Neutrals. At least, he hoped it would not.

Until NEST-1 was over Mexican air space and en route to the location… Prowl would be content to
focus his energies on simple, logical, routine tasks. It was less stressful to his processor.

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The hangar was too damn small. It had always been too small for a mech of Thundercracker's size and mass, but as he watched the NEST soldiers rushing to prepare for yet another mission, he felt that he had to get out into the open air. The entire NEST base was uncomfortably exposed, but it felt better to be outside than in.

Most of his friends were still sleeping, since it was barely six in the morning. Thundercracker nodded at Jazz as he got up to stand outside and Jazz smiled back, giving him the space to do what he had to without interfering. Thundercracker wondered just how harassed the smaller mech actually was, dealing with all of the harsh news they had been given these last few days. They hadn't been able to speak much with so much going on around them, and neither of them wanted to unnerve their friends even more than they already were. He knew that Jazz was strong; they had both learned to be, to survive, and they would continue to be strong for the others. But he was still concerned for the smaller mech.

Thundercracker had hoped that he could just walk out and stand under the rising sun and enjoy the beautiful dawn calmly, by himself, so he could get some thinking done. He had a lot of think about —their future, their safety, the safety of NEST — whose future was intricately connected to the survival of their family group …

It was all a bit much.

…which was why, as Thundercracker walked to the front of the hangar and saw Ironhide approaching him with a dark expression of distrust, his steadily calm mood started to evaporate.

"Where do you think you're going?" the black armored Autobot demanded aggressively as he walked up.


"Considering the fact that your forces allowed me off base during your pathetic excuse of a counterattack and didn't have any trouble, I think you can trust me to stand two meters outside this prison of yours without too much worry."

Obviously, the jibe toward NEST's capabilities had the intended effect, even more so than Thundercracker had expected. Ironhide closed the gap between them and raised a powering-up plasma cannon to aim directly at his spark. The tension between them was intense, as Thundercracker realized just how low-blow his comment had been. Good.

Thundercracker growled lowly and willed himself not to charge his own weapons as the tall Autobot did his best to loom over the jet and failed. As much as upsetting the arrogant Autobots was pleasing, Thundercracker had the sense to fear an actual fight.

"You had better watch yourself, Decepticon," Ironhide snapped, plasma cannon whirling uncomfortably close to Thundercracker's canopy. "Optimus may believe you've changed, but I don't trust you. One move—one step out of line—and I will enjoy blowing your pit spawn aft to pieces—"

Ironhide flinched when someone stepped up beside him. Thundercracker glanced down and saw Jazz squeezing his way between the two of them. The plasma cannon was immediately retracted, since it had been literally an inch away from Jazz's face.

"What do you want?" Ironhide demanded, sounding angry, but there was a nervous tic in his tone.
All of them had reasons to be afraid of ghosts, Thundercracker mused.

Jazz tilted his head, pressing back further into Thundercracker's canopy. The jet could hear Jazz's claws tracing over his own leg plating, flexing, casually pointing out the fact that those claws could rip a mech's spark out. Ironhide stared downwards, probably not detecting the threat. Yet.

"I want a lot of things, Ironhide," Jazz began, deceptively slow, "like fer my friends t' be alive again, or fer that plan of ours t' actually have worked... an' not sent us into a world where we don't even know which way is up. I want fer the friends I have left t' be happy here, regardless, an' fer all of us t' find a place to belong..."

Reaching up, Jazz gently and pointedly moved Ironhide's lax cannon arm ever-so-slowly away from his line of sight with a single clawed finger.

"An' I would really, really like it if you would stop threatenin' my partner," Jazz continued, a smile reaching his faceplates but not his voice. Thundercracker almost smirked; Jazz was no pushover. That was one of the many reasons he loved him.

Almost humorously, it was that comment—not Jazz's physical defense of Thundercracker—that made Ironhide balk and step backwards, mostly in shock. "Partner?" he spat, his surprise turning into anger. "You're... with a Decepticon?"

He must have heard the rumors before, but hearing it from the actual person of interest was apparently shocking to him.

Jazz remained calm. "I'm with a Neutral. A Neutral with a Neutral," he said simply. He smiled thinly. "Things changed, 'Hide. It ain't easy t' fathom, but they did, an'... I'm happy like this. Even if he was a Decepticon still... I'd love 'im."

Ironhide growled and stepped back further, even as Jazz grinned and waved him away, pleasant. The tension was gone, but the air was uncomfortably heavy.

"Are you really happy? Thundercracker growled at himself and the stray doubt. He moved back, letting Jazz back up as well, so they could turn and walk away together, his outside walk forgotten. Perhaps they would have a chance to talk now, even without going outside.

"I don't need you to defend me," the jet said lowly, as they walked slowly away from the Autobot.

"I was protectin' Ironhide," Jazz replied, cheekily. He glanced up at Thundercracker, visor narrowed slightly. "We can't fight back against these guys, TC. Optimus would kill ya."

Thundercracker reluctantly agreed, but said nothing out loud about doing so. "I could take him," he said, shrugging. Jazz laughed.

"As much as that kind of smack down would be fascinatin' t'watch, please don't try it," he said, voice strained. Slowly, Jazz stopped walking and stared at one of the container units, his gaze a thousand yards away from anything else. "I... I can't take that much more stress."

Thundercracker frowned and turned to face Jazz. "...He's bothering you." The image of a specific black and white cop car flashed into his mind and a spark of anger flared in his spark. The mature side of him said to leave it be, but the jealousy was difficult to deal with.

Jazz hesitated and that wasn't a good sign. "He..." he began, stopping. He laughed shortly and seemed to shrink backward into himself. "No. That's... that's just... creepy, you know? Ya think a mech is dead, an' then he ain't, an'... Primus."
Thundercracker reached up and cupped the back of Jazz's helm, pulling him forward. "If it's not a problem, ignore it. I'm sure there are other copies... other... lives still present here that will disturb us both," he said. He had spent countless sleepless hours thinking of where this world's Skywarp was, trying to figure out if that even mattered. He couldn't feel any bond. "Just keep remembering that they aren't who we lost. They aren't the same."

That was easier to say than actually believe. Jazz stared up at him with a grief-filled visor and Thundercracker mirrored that grief in his own spark. They had to be strong, even though it was terribly unfair.

"I know..." Jazz said, softly. He moved closer, still looking up at Thundercracker with a sad look. "I'm sorry... you...ya don't think I would leave ya, do ya?"

Thundercracker wanted to say he wasn't sure, but that wasn't the truth. He knew that Jazz was sincere. "...No," he replied, listening to that mature thought, even if he wanted to be immature and feel jealous. It was foolish.

Jazz gripped Thundercracker's arms tightly. "I wouldn't. I love you, TC. I do," he said, voice finally finding firm ground. He dropped his head, though, and rested it against Thundercracker's canopy. "I'm just... scared. I'm sick of bein' scared."

There was nothing Thundercracker wanted more than to make that fear go away. Jazz, their humans, all the rest of their friends—they had suffered enough. They had given up Wheeljack and the familiarity of their old world to come here, to a supposedly safer place. They shouldn't have had to worry at all now, but fate wasn't done giving them a hard time apparently.

Grasping the back of Jazz's helm gently, Thundercracker leaned down and touched their foreheads together. It was the closest thing the Transformers had to a human kiss and meant just as much. He and Jazz lacked a true bond, but for now, they would have to make do with open communication and physical touch. They didn't need a bond, he rationalized, to share and understand each other's grief and fears—

He heard a short intake of breath several feet away and Thundercracker looked up, surprised he had missed seeing the human standing there. It was a NEST soldier, probably just a grunt, but the look of horror on his face that battled with utter embarrassment was enough to make Thundercracker want to laugh.

"Hey, what—oh. Holy crap, um, sorry!" the soldier sputtered, holding up a clipboard as if that would protect him from the awkward scene in front of him. "Jeez! My bad!"

Jazz burst out laughing and Thundercracker groaned as the human sped off, spouting awkward apologies. They had never had problems explaining their relationship to humans before (who had always taken it as a default) but now, things were a little different. He wondered if the humans even knew mechs could feel affection; when things were calmer, Barns would probably investigate in the name of science, or something inane like that.

"Man, we are screwed," Jazz chuckled, burying in his face in the crook of Thundercracker's arm. "Ah, well..."

Thundercracker frowned down at his mate. "You're worried about the situation in Mexico, then," he stated, knowing that had to be what was truly bothering the other mech now, if it wasn't Prowl. It was on the jet's mind as well, but Jazz, attempting to be useful, was probably frustrated by his inability to help more.
"Yeah. Prowl an' Bee wanted me t' go t' th' communications center t' talk t' Prime once they land." Jazz hesitated. "D'ya think they'll find that energon cache?"

Thundercracker shook his helm. "I have no idea," he replied. During their war he had led air strikes against the US and European military forces. He hadn't been involved in his world's actions in Latin or South America, so he couldn't provide in-depth intel. "Don't worry. If it's there, they'll handle it." They had better.

"Every time I stop worryin' about one thing, I find somethin' else t' worry about," Jazz lamented, standing back a little. He shook his helm. "What a life, man."

"You're strong. You always have been," Thundercracker replied, leaning closer again. "And I will always be here to support you."

Come Hell or high water, as Kass would say, that would always be true between them. Thundercracker couldn't promise his loved ones much, even now, but he could certainly promise that.

Jazz grinned up at him, teasing. "You'd better be, TC," he said. His visor dimmed, however, and he touched his hands gently over Thundercracker's spark. "Thanks."

Thundercracker just smiled back. It was the least he could do.

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Sonoran Desert
Northern Mexico

They were looking for an energon cache hidden among the mountains in the northern part of the Mexican Sonoran Desert. Weeks ago Jazz had given them a list of sites he had discovered in his own world that had been related to the 'Cons, and this had been the first of them to ping their satellites with activity and energon readings. Ratchet understood that the pressure for them to get in and out without being noticed by the local Mexican population was tremendous, but he would have preferred that they approach the site with more caution. After the disaster with Megatron's remains and the loss of the fragment, they couldn't afford to be sloppy, politics be damned.

Standing in the sparse stretch of territory, Ratchet waited as the small military unit surveyed and inspected the area around them. There were no clear signs of Decepticons in the area.

"Will?" Optimus asked, glancing down at their human friend.

Lennox shook his head, jaw tense. "There's nothing here. Nothing on radar," he said, looking back at his soldiers, who also shook their heads.

"I'm not detecting any Cybertronian signals," Ratchet added, glancing around. He dared to hope this had just been a mistake.

"I ain't picking up any other signatures either," Hound added, on all fours on the ground. His olfaory sensors were in top form on such an organic planet. "Nothin' but silica dioxide an' siliciclastic rocks."

Sunstreaker scowled. "Slaggit."

"Hey, be grateful," Lennox shot back, though he didn't look like he was ready to relax and head home. "But we're not leaving until we double check everywhere. Jazz said they sometimes used underground caverns."
"And lakes. This is a desert," Sunstreaker groused.

While his teammates debated and argued quietly among themselves, Ratchet continued to look around them. It was a very empty, desolate place, with a few green patches of cacti and brush to break up the beige backdrop of sand. The mountains helped to make the area look less flat, though they weren't very tall. The shade they provided for the local wild life during the hottest part of the days probably wasn't much.

Optimus turned and caught Ratchet's gaze. "Perhaps we have just overestimated the situation," he said, hesitant. They didn't want to make another mistake by disregarding any leads, but wasting resources like this wasn't a key victory plan either, Ratchet had to rationalize.

"Alright," Lennox began, walking up toward Prime, "we'll put this on our hot list, but we need to clear out. We only have fifteen more minutes before—"

Ratchet froze as the air around them shifted. It was not a breeze, nor was it the sensation of a cloaked mech reappearing. He hadn't felt such a motion in megavorns, back when he was on the front lines of Iacon, and truly saw the worst their enemies could do to the Autobots' woefully underprepared forces.

"Prime—!" he started to yell, but it was much too late.

It was a teleporter. A fast, large and skilled one, at that. Ratchet was thrown backwards as the hulking metal mass reassembled barely three yards away from him, displacing the air and sending it out in a huge gust. The humans all screamed, the blast enough to send them flying.

It wasn't just another mech. As Optimus just barely managed to turn and face the unexpected Decepticon—because what else would it be?—the mech's wings became clear and prominent on its back. The two larger mechs immediately attacked each other, forgoing cannons for brute strength. Far above them, two more suddenly appeared from beyond the mountains.

Seekers. If NEST wanted to actually see the end of the war, Ratchet thought darkly, they had to amp up their aerial firepower, because Seekers seemed to be their key weakness. Perhaps they should have had Thundercracker here with them; at least if he got killed, the US military wouldn't have to lose more of their own pilots.

Ratchet ducked as the Seekers in the air swooped down and their missiles tore up the rocky, sandy ground, obscuring the air with the sediment. He couldn't tell if they were actually aiming for anything. The fliers screeched overhead, their turbines' roars blending in with the yelling of the NEST team below.

Had they expected this, they would have been ready, Ratchet knew; NEST was a good team. This just proved, however, their weakness outside of organized warfare. He found it irritating that a country that had obtained its own freedom through the application of guerrilla warfare was so unwilling to embrace it to fight against the Decepticons. But NEST officials had scoffed at the notion of the "new way of war" the Autobots promised would be brought to bear by the Decepticons; perhaps this was the example they had needed to believe that threat.

The teleporter had focused his attack only on Prime and Ratchet could see the scuffle through the smoke. Sunstreaker had made the right choice to let the two larger mechs go head to head, because the Seekers in the air had doubled back and they needed cover fire. Lennox shouted for his men to take cover. They were exposed and had nothing to take shelter under. Ratchet slid in front of a line of soldiers to block an incoming strike. His plating took the heat of it, but the actual shot thankfully hit the dirt instead of him directly.
::How the frag are we going to fight these freaks? :: Sunstreaker demanded over the comm. He and Hound were taking potshots up at the sky, but the fliers were drastically outpacing them.

::Keep them busy!:: Optimus shot back, sounding strained. Ratchet sought the Prime out through the smoke, but all he could see was the taller mech's back. ::Get Lennox's team out!::

Ratchet struggled to his feet, knowing every second counted. They had to retreat, although getting the C-5M that had delivered them there—which stood only a few hundred meters away from where they were getting blasted—into the air would be too dangerous.

"Get on the plane without us," Ratchet said hurriedly to Lennox, practically having to grab the human as he rushed by, trying to organize his men into a pointless counter assault. "We'll distract them!"

"Are you crazy?!" Lennox shot back, horrified. At first, Ratchet thought he human was concerned about leaving them for the Mexicans to find. Of course, he underestimated his friend. "We're not leaving ANYONE behind!"

Another close explosion made them both duck. Ratchet turned and fixed the Major with a fierce look.

"They're toying with us," he shouted. "We cannot fight them like this and we can't allow all of us to be killed while trying to escape! Get out of here!"

"This is a team, not two separate units!" Lennox shot back, frantic. He gestured up at the sky, having to yell over the sounds of battle. "We called for the air force. We just have to hold on until they get here!"

Ratchet had heard that before. Turning in exasperation, Ratchet tried to get a fix on the Seekers in the air. They didn't have the time to wait for back up. Perhaps if they lured the fliers down, they could properly fight them.

Through the smoke, Ratchet could finally make out Optimus. The taller Autobot was still fighting the teleporter, and despite the Seeker's higher mass, Optimus had the upper hand; the Decepticon was pinned to the ground. Why his allies weren't actually aiming to help him or kill the NEST squad below confused Ratchet, because surely they could see that the teleporter was losing—

The last thing Ratchet anticipated was seeing another creature rise up out of the ground a few yards from where Prime grappled with the Seeker. It wasn't a bi-pedal mech; it had to have been a drone of some sort from its animal-like design, quite like a scorpion. It launched itself out of its tunnel and into the air toward its target—Prime. Part of Ratchet's mind screamed incoherently, while out loud, he could only shout out to his leader in warning.

::Sunstreaker!:: he yelled, rushing forward as the second Decepticon latched onto Optimus' shoulders, yanking him back off of the other mech on the ground. ::Get over here, now! Prime needs —!:

Optimus was one of the strongest warriors in the Autobot army. Even being swarmed, he still stood. He couldn't reach the black armored drone tearing into his back, but he could certainly grab the Decepticon in front of him. He slammed his fist into the red optics and sank his fingers into the exposed neck cables of the flier, pulling hard. Sparks flew up along with the Seeker's death screech.

Without any warning, the dark scorpion on his back unleashed its own howl and, his deadly tail raised, stabbed through the Prime's armor. Optimus dropped the Seeker and stumbled forward. The
dagger-shaped appendage had gone straight through his back and, to Ratchet's horror, through his chestplates, before repeatedly stabbing again and again.

*Oh, Primus, no, no, no—!*

Sunstreaker appeared out of nowhere and unleashed a volley of plasma bullets, hitting the offending Decepticon straight on. The Decepticon went flying backwards, screaming. All Ratchet could focus on was how the serrated tail was yanked out of Optimus' back, bringing with it energon, sheared metal and sparks—

*No, no—*

Prime fell hard, energon flying through the air, and the ground shook as if the entire Earth itself had shuddered in horror.

"NO!"

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**NEST Compound**  
**Plumas National Park, USA**

Sam knew something was wrong the moment he stepped on base. There were still some soldiers, but everything was quiet. It wasn't silent; there was a background buzz almost, as people moved around to handle different things. He could see reconstruction going on all over the place. He found it difficult to look at that one section of destroyed airfield, where the All Spark had been obliterated. It made him want to hurl again.

Mikaela grasped his arm tightly and he let her hold on as they followed Bumblebee briskly toward Hangar C. Apparently, they had been forced to use part of the open hangar as their communications center while the original room was being worked on. Sam wasn't surprised to see several Autobots huddled around a large row of computers and screens. The screens were tiny, which made them harder for the mechs to view, and they didn't have the fancy hook-ups that the computers in Hangar A had had, so the NEST humans had to do a lot of the typing and command work.

They weren't the only ones standing there, listening to the humans give orders and relay status on the mission. Jazz was there, listening quietly from the side of the room, ignoring the odd looks Sideswipe and the newly-released Hoist sent him. Sam walked up cautiously while Bumblebee spoke quickly with some NEST soldiers. Jazz noticed him and turned to face him.

"Hey, Witwicky," Jazz said, nodding to him. He paused and gave Mikaela a strange smile. "Hey, Mikaela."

Mikaela, knowing the story as well as Sam did concerning her and Jazz's relationship in the alternative world, smiled back. "Hello, Jazz."

"Are you helping them?" Sam asked, interested in why the survivor mech was just standing around. Maybe that meant Prowl was accepting their help full-time. That was... well, it wasn't a *good* thing, really, because that meant their worlds were really syncing up, but he supposed it was good they were covering all of their angles when it came to preventing Decepticon attacks.

Jazz chuckled. "Sort of. Just listenin' in, t' see if I can help," he said, shrugging. He had the most obvious human gestures out of all of the mechs there. "They just landed in Mexico."

Bumblebee suddenly appeared to Sam's side and he raised a finger at Jazz in warning. "They don't
have the clearance," he said. Sam tried not to be insulted by that, knowing his friend was just watching out for them.

"Oh, right," Jazz said, understanding. He shot Mikaela and Sam a sympathetic grin. "I know how that feels. Sorry."

Sam knew that being kept in the dark was normal; it still hurt. He nodded and looked around for a means of getting out of everyone's way. He supposed the safest place for he and Mikaela, who had rushed over for a short check-up on Hoist, to go for now would be the dormitories. Boring, but "safe." After all of the problems NEST had endured lately, he didn't want to irritate the already agitated soldiers more.

Of course, just standing there for thirty seconds more was a mistake. Sam heard heavy, human footsteps and withheld a groan when he saw Simmons stomping over toward him with a sour expression.

"I thought you said he was at the other base thing," Sam hissed up at Bumblebee, who shook his head, just as exasperated.

Simmons stopped short of the two. "What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded. He returned Sam's glare without missing a beat and shot a dirty look Mikaela's way as well. "This ain't daycare. This is a secure military operation and—"

"For Christ's sake, just leave 'em alone," Epps snapped from the console. He turned around just enough to shake his head disapprovingly at Simmons. "You know these two. It's not like we're discussing codes. Just let them stay."

Simmons turned even redder and started off another self-righteous tirade about keeping the base secure and Sam sighed.

Jazz made another chuckling sound and grinned down at Sam in amusement. "If it helps, he was just as much of a dick in my world, too," he said.

"At least some things are universal, then," Mikaela concluded, walking over. All three laughed.

"—Plumas base! I repeat, Plumas base, do you respond?" a disembodied voice from the radio station suddenly demanded in a hurried, frantic voice. "We have—!"

How that one radio transmission sounded as loud as it did wasn't clear to Sam. He had tuned out most of the military dialogue in the background by default, since none of it really made any sense to him. However, the moment he heard that, everyone else did too; Bumblebee froze, Jazz tensed up, and Simmons whirled around, successfully distracted. All at once, the pace and atmosphere of the hangar changed.

"What's going on?" Sam asked. His question was swallowed up by all the other voices, of mechs and soldiers, as everyone tried to figure out just that.

Looking up, Sam saw Bumblebee staring at the communications desk with a strange, unsure look.

At the desk, Epps was taking over the communications. "This is Epps, at Plumas home base. I repeat, what is—?" he was saying into his mic, before suddenly cutting himself off when the voice returned with a single sentence.

Beside them, Bumblebee made a choking sound, more akin to a dying man than that of an advanced alien life form.
"Optimus Prime is dead."

Sam stared at the screen and felt everything stop. Over the speaker, the responding soldier repeated his hurried answer, even as every being in the room stared on in horror:

"Optimus Prime is dead."

End

Chapter 21

Happy hiatus! :D See you in two weeks.

A/Ns:
- Despite constantly bugging him, the twins and Prowl are totally bros. Not that Prowl really understands this, but that's okay.
- I remembered you, Scorponok. I still love you, even if Bay abandoned you so unlovingly in the desert. Of course, you're still a jerk, but that's okay, too.
- Fun fact of the chapter: this isn't the last cliffhanger/terrible twist. I've got plenty more coming your way~
- My head canon for action flicks is this: if one good guy can kill a bad guy with one lucky shot, it also means one bad guy can kill a good guy in similar fashion. Suck it, movie physics, aka one of my biggest pet peeves.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delays, everyone! The hiatus is over. Many thanks to Shantastic for beta'ing this. :) Lennox deals with things and then Danny becomes the consoler for once. Cue the depressing Linkin Park theme song repeat!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Amedee Army Airfield, Sierra Army Depot
California, United States

It was surreal, how normal the final approach to Amedee seemed to Lennox. NEST-1 was filled with noise, the drone of the engines, the chatter of the flight crew and orders being shot back and forth as the soldiers prepared to debark. When the nose cone lifted to allow them to unload, Lennox could hear the sounds of the Army depot base and its occupants. It was almost like a normal return from a mission. Even the transfer to the helicopters for the hop to Plumas seemed relatively normal.

What wasn't normal, or pleasant, was landing to face a wall of metal and flesh allies, who were all lined up along the tarmac, waiting. Waiting for Lennox to tell them the truth.

Never had doing so seemed so impossible. Thankfully, he didn't have to tell them anything. They could see for themselves.

He saw Prowl and Ironhide, looking past Lennox to where four more helicopters were gently lowering the other Autobots to the ground. Prowl actually looked ill; Lennox didn't have to know doorwing language to recognize his misery. Ironhide... he just looked... broken.

As the hovering choppers descended one by one to lower Ratchet, Sunstreaker and Hound to the ground, Sideswipe said something in Cybertronian and Jolt made a wailing sound, both edging closer, but then stopping after moving just a few feet. Bumblebee and Hoist were further back and looked like they were too afraid to get closer to the last hovering helicopter.

The thought of their pain made Lennox turn his tired eyes to Epps and Simmons. He was vaguely concerned at the sight of the former agent, worried that he'd be obliged to protect the man from being squashed by a furious giant robot when he started shooting his mouth off. But the dark haired man said nothing. Both he and Epps were gawking at the last hovering chopper with appropriate levels of horror etched into their faces.

Lennox didn't know if it was sad or actually a good thing, to see Simmons speechless. It gave him
fewer troubles, at the very least.

"Everyone back up," he heard himself croak. He certainly didn't sound like himself, or a Major in the United States army. He gestured up at the mechs specifically, knowing they'd need more room. "All of you, back up. We need room."

He didn't notice if they had obeyed or not. Lennox had turned to give the mechs from the NEST-1 squad his attention. That was definitely less pleasant than facing their grim waiting party, but Lennox knew his job wasn't done yet.

He wouldn't be done for a while.

Sunstreaker and Ratchet stepped into the center of the landing pad to receive Prime's body as that last chopper lowered him to the ground. Hound was too injured to help, and had stepped back to stand near Prowl and Ironhide.

The entire group fell silent as the body was gently laid down on the asphalt. Lennox had never seen Sunstreaker move so carefully, or seen Ratchet that unhinged. There were no words, none at all, that could fix what they were seeing.

Optimus Prime was dead. By now Lennox had fought enough mechs to know what a dead one looked like. The grayed eyes, the gaping chest wound, and the unmistakable limpness to his limbs—death was a universal constant, no matter the species. The expressions of the other Autobots there spoke louder than just the physical signs, however. Bumblebee was keening and had finally moved closer. Sideswipe had gone to his brother's side and stared down at their fallen leader with unabashed grief.

The Autobots hadn't just lost a military leader; they had lost their king, their greatest inspiration, their best friend, their high priest. Lennox took a steadying breath as he tried to combat his own despair.

Prime was dead.

They had to reorganize, try to find some semblance of order. They had to fix this, no matter how unfixable. Prime was dead, but they weren't. Earth was still depending on them—and there was no time to grieve. Not yet.

Epps stepped forward and placed a steadying hand on his shoulder. They stared at each other and Lennox nodded slowly.

Not yet.

Turning, Lennox saw all of his "men"—human and Autobot—standing there. They would move the body to Hangar A, which they had been using as command central for the past week. Now that Hangar C was back up and running communications, they had planned to use A mostly for supply storage, since it was less damaged than most of the others. Prime would be out of sight, but still safe. Secure. It would give people a place to grieve their loss, when they had time to mourn. There was no time to waste on standing there in shock, however.

"Get out of here and get back to your duties!" he said, tiredly, his voice shocking to himself and to many others, who looked at him in surprise. He directed several of his men to make room in Hangar A. He rounded on Prowl, who flinched uncharacteristically. "Prowl, get your people back to Hangar C and get debriefed from Sunstreaker."

"I—"
"We don’t need a damn circus," Lennox said. He ignored how hurt that caused Prowl to look; he especially ignored the waver of his own voice. "We need to figure out what our next steps are, and to do that you need our information. Hoist, Sideswipe, we need you to help carry him. Ironhide, you too. Sunstreaker and Ratchet—get Hound to medical, ASAP!

They had to figure this out—fast. With Prime gone, Prowl was the best one to take over strategic command for the 'Bots. But from what Lennox remembered, Ironhide would be in charge of the actual fighting now. The Autobots had to deal with their change of command so Lennox could tell his bosses just who would be in charge of the Autobots now.

Now that everything had changed.

Their failure had come in not being prepared for an assassination attempt. That was what it had been, essentially; the Decepticons had not been aiming to wipe out the entirety of NEST, or even defend their base. They had only targeted Prime. Once the Autobot leader had fallen, and that bastard insect-thing had been obliterated by an enraged Sunstreaker, the remaining Seekers had fallen back. They had left the survivors standing in the middle of the desert with their minds slowly unraveling, as had their collected calm.

Lennox remembered screaming. Nothing coherent. Just... screaming. All he could see was Prime lying there, with Ratchet scrambling to stem the flow of energon, do something to fix the problem. The scorpion-like tail had been made for such an attack at close-range. Lennox and the other humans had known it was too late by that point, because Hound, despite being wounded, had fallen to the ground wailing. They didn't need to know the language to recognize the signs of grief. Sunstreaker had freaked out and Ratchet just sat there, grasping Prime's lifeless hand without a shred of hope in his own optics.

When they had finally managed to get it together enough to think of retreat, escape, they’d realized that in his mech form Optimus took up too much space in the cargo bay. Lennox, in a brief moment of hysteria-caused numbness, hadn't known what to do. They were out of time and their only option was to leave someone behind—either some of his men, some of the other mechs, or Prime himself. But none of them could stand the idea of abandoning Prime there, leaving him for the Mexican Army to find. And leaving the other mechs there wouldn’t work any better—they would be an easy target for the Decepticons, and he didn't want to leave them to grieve alone.

The solution had been proposed by one of the tactics officers back at the Plumas base. Two squads of human soldiers had stayed instead. Contacting Keller, they had arranged for the Mexican military to rendezvous with their squad and transport them to a secured facility where NEST could send a plane to retrieve them. They had also dumped the extraneous computers and equipment that took up a lot of the available space in the forward section of the cargo bay, and had Sunstreaker destroy them right then and there.

None of them had worked to find a way to bring Optimus back to the base because of the fear of letting the other military force find an alien, find out about the Autobots; Lennox knew that because it hadn't even crossed his own mind until much later. Lieutenant McCarty had made her suggestion, Keller had worked diplomatic magic and the soldiers onsite had labored hard to make physical room for Optimus because none of them wanted to leave him lying in the dirt like he was trash, an alien, like he was only made of metal. It wasn't right. It wasn’t fucking right.

Once they were underway he had only spoken briefly with Keller, but the call had been to the point. Even before the discussion, Lennox had known what he had to do next—organize their wounded army and prepare for the next attack. With Prime gone, they lacked the strength they had had before; Megatron—Galvatron—whatever he was calling himself now, would not overlook their weakness
once he discovered his attack had succeeded.

The base quieted as the news spread among the rest of the humans. Lennox walked on unsteady legs past men and women who, despite being just as shocked and upset as he was, kept sending wary glances his way. Lennox knew he must look like hell, but there wasn't any time to worry about him.

After stopping by Hangar C, and making sure Prowl was up to date on everything that had happened in Panesco, Lennox had intended to find Epps and discuss their next move. They should have moved the 'Bots to the other base earlier, but now they would have to figure out who was going where… now that they were missing the strength and leadership of Prime—

Lennox stumbled, but managed to grab hold of the side of the hallway wall before he actually fell forward. Blinking, he was surprised to see he was already on the way to the command center. He hadn't even noticed he had walked that far. The hall was empty and the far-reaching corners seemed darker than normal. Lennox took a deep breath as he stood up and looked around.

The whole base suddenly seemed supernaturally quiet. Farther away, he thought he heard people talking, the sound a low murmur, but to Lennox, the silence seemed to echo loudly in his ears.

All at once, going anywhere seemed impossible. Slowly, he sank down against the wall. He stared outward at nothing and felt twinges of panic lash out at the corners of his mind.

Oh, God.

If only they had moved faster, gotten out of there, never gone at all. If they had at least done something to circumvent Prime's death—anything—it would have been better than this. They had lost—they had lost something more than an ally.

He had always known they could lose one of the Autobots in the course of the war for Earth—after all, they were mortal, just like his fellow human soldiers. He had once, in a moment of resolution, made up a list of the weaknesses of each of his alien comrades, so that he would understand when they were up against a foe they could not fight. It wasn't morbid to consider the deaths of his allies, because that preparation was what it took to be a leader and a soldier.

But it had never once crossed his mind that Prime could die.

And although these aliens had become his friends, Lennox really hadn't expected the loss to be so painful.

Clutching his head with both hands, Lennox took several deep breaths.

Oh, God. What were they going to do now?

Footsteps made him flinch. Looking up, Lennox saw Epps standing there. The fresh lines of stress, grief and panic were a familiar sight; Lennox surmised he probably looked even worse than his friend did.

"Will, are you okay?" Epps asked, worried.

The soldier in him wanted to say yes, because this was part of the job. This was normal. But William Lennox was tired. He was so damn tired.

"…No," he said. He ran a weary hand over his face. "God, no, I am not."

Epps stared down at him. They had always been friends, since basic. Moments like these reminded
Lennox of how much he appreciated his brothers in arms; they knew what he was feeling and didn't have to say, it'll be okay. Because they knew they couldn't promise something like that.

"We won't let this mean nothing," Epps said softly. "You know that, man."

Lennox swallowed hard, fighting back another wave of hysteria. "I should have done something," he said, clenching his fists. "We all should have… stopped this."

How would they recover from this? To lose the Shard was one thing; to lose Optimus was far more serious. His death meant a loss of leadership, experience, military morale, and more importantly, the loss of something tangibly important: a friend. Optimus had kept them going for so long, always encouraging them, always seeming like he knew what to do, no matter how bad it got.

Lennox prayed for strength.

"Go get some rest, Will," Epps said, clasping his shoulder. He stood and gave Lennox a meaningful look before walking away, wordlessly taking over the duties he knew the Major didn't have the strength to finish that day.

It seemed like an impossible task, to walk away from everything, but Lennox knew he was useless like this, so he did drag himself up. He walked past silent men and could hear the wailing of the Cybertronians in lonesome mourning.

When he finally slept, he dreamt of sand and blood—and when he woke up, he heard himself screaming like he had in the desert. The only difference was that he didn't know if he was screaming in the dream, or while waking up.

_God help us._

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For a world that was so markedly different from the one they'd left behind, it certainly seemed normal. Danny might never have seen a shower or toilet, or even had a hot bath before she got here, but she had spent her entire life with giant alien robots. And the terror and uncertainty that they felt here was awfully familiar.

But the weather was far too warm for her taste. She had never experienced a warm August afternoon; yes, August had generally been a bit warmer than September, sometimes less warm than July was, but it had never been as warm as her body temperature before, certainly not warm enough to make her truly hot. Before… she had spent days dreaming of what life in the sun would be like, but since coming here, she hadn't left their hangar unless she had to. She sat inside and watched the edges of light move across the expanse of the airfield and felt wariness when it crept against the boundaries of the hangar. She knew the sunlight probably felt good, but she couldn't shake the sense that it would burn her skin if she let it touch her.

Sitting around for weeks in the hangar hadn't been a better idea though, because it was very lonely. Danny didn't really remember the first few moments of their time here on the base; those days were a blur to her now. She could remember feeling numb, empty, and then… everything had changed again. She had seen a single mech's face—not Wheeljack, because it wasn't Wheeljack, she didn't care what the others said—and that numbness had been replaced by fire.

She'd cried for a long time after that – she couldn't remember ever having cried so much before. Everything hurt. Barns had tried, as did Kass, Rachel and the others, to make things better, to comfort her, but she still cried. She fell asleep and then woke up crying, because—she didn't know
what else to do.

Everything was ruined now. Everything. She might be alive, but what was the point in that? Her family had a gaping hole in it, a wound that wouldn't close. And Danny could feel exterior forces pressuring in around them; the Autobots didn't trust them. They didn't want them here. She had a heart-wrenching fear every time she saw one of them make eyes at Wildrider or Vortex, or even Thundercracker, who had been trying so hard to make peace. She was afraid of what the future held for them and wondered which person she loved would be lost next.

Then, of course, there was what had happened yesterday. Danny hadn't had a clue as to why the Autobots were suddenly gone and the soldiers were practically out of sight as well. She found out when Jazz stumbled in and was practically hysterical. He had collapsed against Thundercracker and couldn't say anything, even when the others clamored for an answer in their own panic. When he finally had calmed down and was able to tell them what happened, Danny couldn't believe it.

Optimus Prime had been a mythical figure in her mind; Wheeljack had told her stories about how amazing the great leader was. She hadn't really had the chance to look more closely at the giant mech in person, but the few glimpses she had gotten of him had been impressive. She'd thought he was nice, with how he did his best to make sure the survivors were okay. That had earned her respect, even if she was still a little afraid of the overall intentions of NEST.

But now he was dead. Again. Danny had nothing to tell Jazz, even as he grieved the loss of his leader for a second time. Bluestreak and Arcee had thrown a fit, unable to cope with the emotional toll. Vortex and Wildrider had said nothing, withdrawing from the dramatic scene, either because they felt awkward, or because they just didn't know how to respond. Danny had sat next to Barns and watched them all, and Barns had looked at her with fearful eyes.

The future was now up in the air, and rapidly falling back down to earth, Kass said later, when the four humans had been alone for a moment or two. The mechs were far too upset to speak to them about it, and the humans tried to respect their feelings of loss. But they still needed to talk about the situation.

Yesterday morning, their past and the future of this world had been significantly different. They'd all worked hard to convince themselves that they had a chance for a better future in this world than they had in their own past. But even though the start of the war had been so different… the events of this world were aligning to theirs.

The All Spark was gone. Prime was dead. The Fallen had shown up, and now, Megatron was probably calling himself Galvatron and regrouping with his army. Whether or not that actually meant NEST was destined to fail, that the Cybertronians were trapped on the Earth, and humanity was utterly doomed or not was beyond Danny's knowledge. She was scared though; very scared.

Normally, that meant she could turn to her friends for support. They had lived through all sorts of danger, seen and experienced many terrifying things, and had supported each other through it all. This was nothing new.

But it was different, this time; Danny felt the change deeply as she looked around at their group of ten. This was a different sort of fear. They could handle violence. They could handle running for their lives. They could even handle the unknown. But none of them could handle this waiting, the enforced inactivity. Before, if they hadn't kept moving, they would die. Now, they had no choice but to remain still and just… wait.

Not that that literally meant waiting around. Jazz, Thundercracker and Arcee were frequently gone – speaking with the Autobot leaders, working with NEST. After helping to repair the base after the
Decepticon attack, Vortex continued to work with the repair crew, moving equipment and providing heavy lifting when the humans needed it. Bluestreak insisted on acting as escort for their four humans, or at least the three that liked going outside. Which left Danny staying behind, sometimes alone.

She frequently found that Wildrider was still around, however, so she spent most of her time sitting nearby or even in his hands or on his legs, reading a book the soldiers had brought for them, marveling at the fact that the books weren't damaged or old, all the words were legible and the binding still held together. Wildrider spent much of his "free" time on the internet, equally immersed in the ability to read from a wide variety of sources. They rarely spoke, but there was comfort in being together, with a friend.

Today, though, she saw this wasn't going to happen, because Wildrider was lying flat on his back. This was alarming at first, because that position left him incredibly vulnerable to attack—he never rested that way when he didn't have one of the others to stand guard. Danny was terribly afraid he was hurt. But as she crept closer, she saw that he was gazing up at the far-off ceiling with a concentrated expression.

A contemplative Wildrider was either a dangerous Wildrider or a depressed one. Danny frowned at her friend, who didn't make any sign that he knew she was there. He didn't seem agitated, so it looked like he was depressed. She knew how grim Wildrider could be about certain things, like religion and the state of his soul. When Wildrider got on a tangent and began to think about his worth in terms of good or evil, he got very depressed. Barns and … Wheeljack had been the only ones to speak with him on such philosophical subjects before. It certainly hadn't been Danny's forte.

Still, she wouldn't know for sure if she didn't ask. She walked over purposely loud to alert him, just in case, but he still didn't seem to care. She climbed up onto his leg and slid over to the middle of his chestplates. The metal and glass canopy were all miraculously intact and shining, like they always should have been.

"Hi, 'Rider," Danny said.

The mech didn't look at her, so she had to lean a bit closer. "Hello," he said. She had never heard him sound so… withdrawn. He was scowling a little bit.

"You look sad," she said, peering into his green optics intently, or as much as she could see them from her angle.

Wildrider stopped scowling and actually lifted his helm up as far as he could to look at her. He smirked. "…You are funny," he accused. He gently poked her chest and she clutched at the offending finger. "You have been sadder."

"Yeah." She frowned at his melancholy. She could see how sad he was just by how dim his optics were. "But why are you sad now?"

Wildrider dropped his head back down and his whole chest section heaved upwards in a mock-sigh. "Vhat is not to be sad for?" he asked dully. He let her hold onto his finger though.

Danny thought about it. There were a lot of reasons to be sad, she had to agree, but that wasn't all they had. "Well, we're alive," she offered.

"Not for long," Wildrider replied. "Ve are doomed."

All at once, that made Danny want to hug her friend more. She could understand his despair, but she
didn't want him to be experiencing it at all. She didn't want to be experiencing it either.

"No, 'Rider. No, not yet," she said, clutching his hand more. She closed her eyes tightly. "Don't give up."

She had seen people give up before, at some of the camps they'd stopped in. She had seen the looks of utter despair, of people who would rather sit there than run anymore, because they had been running for so, so long, that it seemed hopeless to keep going. There had been many times in her own life when she had narrowly escaped losing her own life or the life of a friend, and she had asked whoever was listening in her heart, *What was the point of dodging next time?*

But then she remembered all the good that she had left. All the lives that were still there, all the dreams they had had, and all of the love she so fiercely had for each and every one of them.

Wildrider didn't reply at first. He stared at her in silence, thinking who-knew-what and Danny let him think. If time was all she could give back to her friends, well that was an easy enough gift to give.

"Prime is dead," the mech mumbled softly. He got louder and shook his helm slowly, the metal scraping against the cement floor. "I remember hearing this, long ago. Now, it is a new thing. It was not new in my spark, but now it is." He glared at the ceiling. "Different feelings with it, now."

"You were happy about it before?" she asked, knowing the answer already.

Wildrider chuckled darkly. "Of course. Autobots were enemies," he spat. His attitude receded however, and he became withdrawn again. He held up his free hand and peered at the digits. "Now… I do not know anything. My mind is empty of truths."

"No," Danny replied. She smiled at him when he looked at her blearily. "You know I'm still your friend. You know that we're all still friends." While a simple statement, Danny knew it mattered to Wildrider the most. It mattered to her, after all.

Optics dimming more, Wildrider hummed. "Yes," he agreed. He sighed again and gave her a startlingly new sad look. "Danny."

Danny waited for him to say something else, unsure of what he was thinking about now. She had a gut feeling, however, that she knew what it was. She sat there patiently and held his hand in the only way she was able to.

"I miss him," Wildrider said suddenly, voice faint. He sounded younger, distant… lost. He wasn't talking about Prime, either.

All at once, Danny's heart hurt. She fought a wave of tears back, knowing they wouldn't be of any use. She had learned that in the last few weeks.

"…Same," she said. She sniffed and released his hand to wipe her eyes fiercely, her efforts useless. "I miss him so much, 'Rider."

She missed his voice, his invisible smile, his earfins, his presence—Wheeljack had been the one solid presence she had had her entire life. Through danger, through peace, through heartache and joy, he had always been there. He had been her everything, even after they had met the others. He had been her father; he always would be.

*God* she missed him.

"Do not cry," Wildrider suddenly pleaded, sitting up and jostling her. He whined as he reached out
again, wrapping his hand around her loosely. It was the only way the mechs could show physical support. "Please don't."

Danny took a deep breath and wiped away the last of her tears again, forcing her emotions to hold back. She couldn't upset Wildrider like that by weeping; she had done enough of that for a lifetime. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. Wildrider just whined lowly in reply.

She could have hung there all day. She trusted those hands holding her up in the air. She trusted that rumbling chest in front of her to protect all they loved. Danny gripped the red metal and smiled.

"*They can kill our families. They can take away everything... except the love we have inside our hearts, and the hope that things will get better.*"

At least no one could take away that trust either, Danny realized. No Autobot, no Decepticon, and no drone could ever take that away.

"'Rider, can you promise me something?" she asked softly.

Wildrider tilted his helm. "Anything," he said. He sounded as sane as ever, meaning it completely.

Danny smiled, even though she felt pained. "Don't ever give up. Because that's not what Wheeljack would want us to do. Things will be okay." She took a steadying breath and gripped his metal tightly, as if begging. "And if I stop believing that, make me believe it, too."

The red-and-black mech looked at her in silence at first. Just looked at her. Because Wildrider, despite the chaos and mayhem he liked to cause, and the destructive image everyone around them saw in him—Wildrider saw things. He saw things deeper, stronger, and clearer than Danny's meager eyes could see. He saw with his spark, she realized; she had taught him to a long time ago and he had taken that lesson and made it define who he was. He saw her grief and her fears, but he also saw her honesty. He saw Danny, and that was what mattered.

"...Okay," he said, in a similarly quiet voice. He nodded slowly. "Okay, Danny."

Danny smiled and nodded back.

They would be all right. They just... had to take baby steps.

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Trying to imagine a world without Optimus Prime wasn't just difficult; it was almost impossible.

On the first day, Sam woke up on a military cot in the middle of a dead-silent base, and could only lie there, thinking. He thought about his Autobot friends, who were all grieving, sometimes loudly and spontaneously. He thought about how Bumblebee was practically in a state of shock and couldn't respond to Sam's questions. He thought about how he and Mikaela had to stand back and watch NEST scramble to organize itself into something coherent again.

And then Sam thought about how Optimus was dead. Dead.

It was then that Sam began to think he was inside of an actual nightmare.

It didn't seem real, let alone fair. Time travelers were one thing. Megatron rising from the dead like some sort of zombie was another. But Optimus... dying? Being killed—assassinated—on some stupid, unimportant mission? It wasn't... it couldn't be real.
But on the second day, when Sam woke up to the same exact reality, where his idol was dead and his friends were mourning their mutual loss… how could he deny any of it?

He had never finished the job Optimus had given him. Sam couldn't remember the last words he had said to the Autobot leader, as if they would have mattered. He couldn't remember what sort of goodbye he had given him before leaving the base a week ago. By the time he and Mikaela returned, NEST-1 had already left. Now, goodbyes didn't mean anything. It was too late.

Sam spent his remaining days wandering around, when he wasn't sitting in silence with Mikaela, or when he was visiting Bumblebee. He was worried about his yellow friend. Bumblebee had stopped talking and using the radio all together. He sometimes just sat in his vehicle mode when he wasn't needed by Prowl or NEST and seemed to ignore the entire world, including Sam. The human couldn't even do anything to help, other than quietly sit in the front seat and keep him company. Sam knew 'Bee appreciated the gesture of support, even though it felt so weak.

They'd be going back home soon, to wrap up the remaining loose ends they had back there. Sam couldn't tell his parents anything really, but he would have to tell them about a serious change in plans. School wasn't going to be happening this semester, if at all, because now that there was proof the 'Cons were carrying out actual attacks, they had to act as though NEST and its allies were all targets. Sam hardly considered himself an important figure in the whole scheme of things (Mikaela either for that matter), but he wasn't going to put his or anyone else's life on the line if he could avoid it.

Then again, before… the idea of staying on base had often seemed like a good thing. Now, trapped under the suffocating sense of this new nightmare reality, Sam wasn't glad to be there. Every time he looked at Bumblebee, or any of the other mechs, or even Lennox… it all came back to him.

It had only been two days. Sitting on his assigned bed in one of the empty barracks, Sam found himself staring down at his hands blankly, his mind a million different places at once. He wanted to be somewhere else. For the first time since he could remember after meeting Bumblebee and the Autobots, he wanted to be away from them. It wasn't their fault; it was anything but their fault.

…How could Sam get past this, though? Sam shuddered as his mind tried to wrap itself around that conundrum. This wasn't fair. It wasn't fair. Why did Optimus have… why did…?

He barely heard the sound of someone else entering the dorms, the light, quick footsteps telling him who it had to be before he saw her. Mikaela was in her work clothes still, but Sam felt his heart lighten just a tad upon seeing her. She was beautiful no matter what she wore.

"How's Bumblebee?" she asked, quiet. She had been busy with Ratchet, helping with Hound and Sunstreaker's injuries all day.

Sam shook his head. "I don't know. He didn't say much. Not even the radio." He had never seen the scout look so rundown. Sam could do nothing but sit with him, but even that wasn't good enough. "God... what a day."

His bed creaked as Mikaela sat down next to him. "You okay?" she asked, sliding an arm around him in support.

"Yeah." Sam exhaled and sat up straight. "You?"

Mikaela's eyes were dark. "I'm fine," she said vaguely. She pressed the side of her head into Sam's shoulder. "I'm going to miss him, though."
Mouth dry, Sam barely remembered to answer her. "Me, too," he said, quiet. She gripped his arm tighter. Then, she let go and stood up.

Sam expected her to leave; she wasn't good at handling emotional situations when it was her own problems, though he wasn't any better. Mikaela's issues with her dad were never brought up, nor were the problems with her mother, and Sam never asked, knowing if she wanted to talk, she would. He didn't expect to have to offer her reassurances now after this mutual loss they had all suffered; Mikaela wasn't that type of girl.

But she stayed. She stood there next to him, gazing out at the wall, perhaps in thought, or just struggling internally. Sam closed his eyes tiredly and rubbed his temples, exhausted.

After a long time, Mikaela broke the silence first. "We have to think of something," she said.

Sam flinched and looked up at the other teen in shock. He didn't have to ask what she was talking about either. Something meant everything that was going on.

"Like what?" he asked. "What can we do?" They were even more helpless than the soldiers and definitely more helpless than the mechs were. They couldn't do shit.

"Sam, you're not stupid," Mikaela countered, shaking her head. "Everyone is working their asses off to try to fix this, so there has to be something you, me, all the rest of us civilians can do." Mikaela stopped and put a hand on her hip as she looked down at him. "Don't look at me like that."

Sam couldn't help but glare, defensive. "I can't do anything!" he exclaimed. He gestured at himself. "What can I do, Mikaela? I'm not a soldier. I'm not a politician. I'm not anything!"

Mikaela glared right back. "You're Sam Witwicky, the boy who saved the world." Before Sam could open his mouth to protest that statement, she leaned over him, practically shouting, "And whether you want that title or not, Sam, that means something!"

At first, he wanted to argue. How did that mean something? Anyone could have done what he did. It could have been Optimus, or 'Bee or Mikaela. Sam had never been needed in the grander scheme of things.

But…

Sam cringed at the nervous twitch in his gut when he thought about what she had just said. It didn't matter who had done it, perhaps, but it had been Sam who had. And if Sam had done something, even unintentionally, so critical to the outcome of this horrible war…

Then he had no choice but to try to do something to help stop it. Again.

"Think. We have to think, Sam," Mikaela said quietly. She sat down properly on the bed across from him and gently took his face in her hands. Her deep hazel eyes bored into his own. "You said it yourself. The two timelines are turning out to be the same, right?"

"Yeah…" Sam grabbed her hands and held on.

Mikaela's eyes narrowed. "Why? They were so different before," she said.

Sam shook his head slowly, dislodging her hands. He drew them down to his lap and just held them gently. "Maybe this was inevitable," he said, even though he knew that was a depressing thought.

"…Maybe," Mikaela agreed, her voice faint. She suddenly looked to the side, body going tense.
"But why was it different?"

"I don't know." Sam sighed heavily. "Why would that matter?"

Mikaela glanced back at him sharply. "Because something changed. Something had already changed for us, making our world different from Jazz's world," she said firmly. "And if one change could happen, even if it—even if it only postponed Optimus dying, or Megatron coming back, that means we can still change things. Maybe stop the war completely."

That… was true. Sam stared back at her, trying to think of something more to add to it. He wanted to believe like she did, that they still had a chance. They could make a difference, change things, as long as they fought back and did what they could.

"How could I help with that?" he asked, leaning back a little. He let her hands go as Mikaela stood, suddenly incensed again.

"Because you were one of the reasons things changed, and so was I!" Mikaela exclaimed. She gestured upwards. "Look at the time line, Sam! Mission City was where our worlds diverged, right? Then that means it's important! All of us were factors in changing the outcome of that battle, especially you."

Sam tried—struggled—to wrap his mind around how just a few basic changes like peoples' lives had caused the world to be different. Sure, things were going back to how they were in Jazz's alternate time, but… Sam could see where Mikaela was going with this. If they had changed the world once, they could do it again. He just wished it would be as simple as it had been at Mission City, if one could call that simple. He hadn't known he had changed anything. It had been utter chance.

"I just…" he started. He gripped his face in frustration. "How can that matter now? Even if we change the future, Optimus is still gone."

Mikaela peered down at him with sad eyes. "…I know," she said. "But we can't just give up, Sam. Please."

Of all the things she could have asked him, that was probably the most difficult. But Sam knew that if he could have given her anything in the world… that was it.

"I won't." Sam stood and hugged her, heart searing. "I'm sorry."

Mikaela wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, burrowing her face. "Me, too," she said, through tears.

Things had changed forever, and they weren't okay, but Sam would not give up now. No sacrifice, no victory. Optimus had understood that at Mission City, and even now… Sam had faith in his own power, just as he had faith in the power his friends still could call their own.

Megatron would have to pry that faith from his cold, dead fingers before Sam Witwicky ever gave up.

End Chapter 22.
Next, we'll be sidetracking to the third interlude, but after that, Rachel has a lovely freak out, Jazz has some issues, and some very big things happen outside the course of war. Keller, prepare yourself.

A/Ns:
-Was it only me who laughed, and then got angry, at the ROTF scene where they airlift and then irreverently dump Prime's body down onto the cement like a sack of potatoes? LOL WHAT IS THAT MOVIE, BAY.
-The reason for the base jumping (in case I never mentioned it before) is because Plumas doesn't have enough room for larger planes like NEST-1 to take off. Curse you, geography…
- Sammy, it's time to think a bit more outside your comfort zone, dude. Or is that inside of it?
Interlude 3: Old Friends

Chapter Notes

Set before the end of chapter 22, Mikaela runs into an old friend and a life she never had. Many thanks to my beta Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

She'd learned two years ago that mechs didn't have funerals the way humans did. At the time, it hadn't seemed to matter much to her. She had only known the Autobot named Jazz for a few days before he died, so she hadn't been affected much by his death. And although she remembered the Autobots grieving for his death, she and Sam had been too busy with government personnel, learning what they should and shouldn't say about Mission City, to mourn with them.

Now, Mikaela wasn't sure if she was disappointed, or relieved. She didn't like funerals, and she knew she would never have been able to get through a eulogy service for Prime without breaking down. But the moment of silence that Lennox had called for from all NEST personnel on base, the day after Mexico, had been very brief. It hadn't seemed to be enough—it certainly hadn't seemed respectful enough of the person that Optimus Prime had been, the life he had lived. It wasn't until the mechs took over the area a few hours later that Mikaela and Sam felt the full impact of what had happened.

They started by assembling, along with Lennox and Epps and several of the longest serving NEST personnel, in Hangar A. She found it odd that the mechs didn't do anything for quite a while, other than just… stand there, looking at Prime as he lay in state on an elevated surface. When she showed her confusion, Ratchet told her that it was a time of grieving and acceptance. He'd been far more sullen and withdrawn than she had ever seen him before, as he stood in shifts with the other mechs, like some sort of guard. Throughout this time, the humans could come and go as they pleased, because they were generally ignored. Mikaela was grateful for that. Although Ratchet was willing to explain some things to her, she didn't want to interrupt. She also didn't want to stand there looking at the corpse of one of the greatest people she had ever met in her life. Once… was enough for a lifetime.

But then, after the time of silence, came a time of mourning, which was unsettling to both her and Sam. Neither of them had seen a mech cry before, and she secretly would be happy to never see it again. They didn't cry like humans, per-se, but rather made a noise that was equivalent to wailing or sobbing, without tears. It wasn't a constant thing either. Sideswipe had scared her senseless with the strange noise he made every once in a while. Bumblebee emitted the same odd, bone-rattling noise, only more frequently. When she showed clear concern for the yellow mech, Ratchet told her it was like a human whimper; this particular kind of keening was that of grief. It echoed off the walls of the hangar, reaching the outsides, and continued to echo straight across Mikaela's mind. The only ones who hadn't made a loud noise yet were Prowl, Ironhide and Ratchet, but they were the ones
obviously keeping the others from totally collapsing. They were still the army. They still had… responsibilities, even in times of great sorrow.

Like most of the human soldiers and few civilians on base, Mikaela paid her respects, but then left the hangar to deal with her grief in her own way. The openly depressed faces and despondent behavior was just too much to bear when the organics had their own feelings to sort through. Maybe she was being selfish, but Bumblebee had made it clear he needed time alone to deal with his problems, or deal with them with his own people. She could respect that.

So for the rest of the grieving period she avoided Hangar A and any other mech that she came across, as delicately as she could. Hangar B was obviously off limits because that's where the survivor crew were staying, and there was no way in hell Mikaela was going to deal with their problems any time soon. Hangar C was still being repaired and the sheer number of glum-looking humans wandering around was overwhelming, nearly as bad as watching Wheeljack and Ratchet attempt to comfort both Lamborghini twins and Hound at the base of Optimus' feet.

The base was just too small to avoid everyone. That was why, when Mikaela found herself trying to avoid the rest of their small population without taking up refuge in the barracks like Sam was, she was at first unpleasantly surprised to turn a corner around a stack of shipping crates in Hangar C and find herself directly across from Jazz.

The mech, as most of the transformers did, immediately turned and had no trouble locating her on the ground. He was seated alone on one of the crates, apparently seeking the solitude Mikaela herself had been looking for, and for a long moment, Mikaela considered turning and walking back the way she came. If he wanted solitude, she would give it to him. God knew they all needed at least some time to just… collect themselves.

But after that first moment passed, Mikaela didn't have the feeling that Jazz wanted her to get lost. He was just watching her, waiting for her to make the next move.

Walking up slowly, Mikaela found herself being stared down at by the unfamiliar-yet-familiar mech, whose green visor seemed to glow just a little more dimly than it had the day before. She tucked her hands into her jacket pockets. "Hi, Jazz." There was no reason to be nervous. None at all.

Jazz stared at her in silence for a moment, his systems nearly silent. "...Hello, Mikaela," he said at length. He smiled a little, the metal that made up lips for the mechs just a little bit more noticeable on his faceplates than on some of the others. He'd probably done it on purpose, to look more human. Mikaela knew it was a choice for them, to adjust what humanoid features they took on. Ratchet had told her a while ago that their Jazz, the Jazz who had died in Mission City, had loved experiencing new cultures, and had been thrilled to have the chance to visit Earth. This Jazz had probably reacted in a similar way.

For a few minutes, Mikaela just stood there, watching the small mech, taking in his alien frame. She was used to observing the other Autobots, and since she hadn't known his counterpart here for more than a few days before he was killed, everything was practically new to look at.

The medic in her demanded a further inspection, though she only dared to use her eyes. His claws were different than Bumblebee's gentle, rounded fingers. His visor and curved armor were also unique. From what Bumblebee had told her, Jazz had once been the head of special operations in the Autobot army, so that meant he was a spy, or something. His small frame, light armor, and near-silent engines seemed to support that fact.
Craning her neck, Mikaela dared to meet his steady gaze. He kept a neutral expression, so it was almost impossible to tell what he was thinking. Mikaela was used to Bumblebee, who despite not having a humanoid mouth, was certainly very expressive with his optics. She hadn't realized how much more the visor hid those visual clues than a mouth guard did. It seemed the eyes truly were the windows to the soul, even when they were optics.

"…I…" Mikaela began. She had to clear her throat before continuing. "Uh… are all of your people, um, okay?"

Not that they had seen any fighting recently, but she had no idea what sort of state they were in because of what had happened in Mexico. Maybe the ex-Decepticons had been happy or even disinterested, but the ex-Autobots might be upset.

Jazz seemed to consider his answer carefully. "Yeah. I mean… yeah, we're okay," he replied. He tilted his helm; a sign of curiosity, openness, potential promise of honesty. Mikaela knew she couldn't trust Ratchet's guidelines for mech body language with someone like Jazz, but he sounded honest enough. "How about you? And Sam?"

Mikaela bit her lip. "We're making do," she said quietly, trying to be calm. "Can't really do much of anything right now, but we're… okay."

She wasn't sure if that were true, but she would try to make it true. Sam was suffering in a different way than she was. Optimus had been a friend to both of them, had spent many hours talking with them about their futures, telling them about Cybertron's history. He'd been more than just an ally to Earth for them; he was… their hero. Sam, especially, had idolized the Autobot leader. They had bonded through the battle in Mission City, where they had each saved the other's life. He was Sam's hero, and Sam was taking the loss very hard.

They were okay. But it would take a long time before they could believe it, before they would feel like it was true.

Mikaela saw Jazz was watching her, though she couldn't tell what he was looking at precisely. His visor was irritatingly obscuring. She stared back, just as curious, however. There was more that interested her in him than just his appearance.

"Bee was saying how much you talked about me before," she said, noticing how his helm moved a little to the side—he was obviously following her face with his optics now. Mikaela climbed onto the crate across from him so that they were almost at eyelevel with each other. "About how you knew me."

Before this world, before he had even met his family, Jazz had known a Mikaela Banes who was both the exact same and innately different from the person that Mikaela recognized as herself.

Jazz nodded slowly. "Yeah."

She had no idea if this was off limits to talk about or not. She knew that she had—had died. And Jazz had been upset by this. They had been friends. But…

Part of her was morbidly curious. The other part of her simply wanted to know the truth, no matter how harsh. She only knew Jazz as another Autobot now, but for him… she must have seemed like a ghost.

"I…" Mikaela started to say, considering how to approach the topic. Jazz seemed calm enough, so she felt okay to continue. "How? They—Bee and Kass—they said that I fought alongside you?"
Trying to imagine herself as fighting the Decepticons, or those horrible monster things, the drones that the survivors kept mentioning, was difficult. She wasn't a soldier; she was a mechanic—a medic, if anything. She had thought that would be her place in this war.

Jazz did smile that time, oddly enough. "Yes," he replied, shifting a little, so that his leg came up under his chin. The posture was human and probably incredibly uncomfortable for a mech to take on. For him, the movement was fluid and natural. "Fer a'most a decade, really."

A decade? "Wow." Mikaela stared at him, stunned. She had fought for ten years with him? Actually fighting? "I… never saw myself as a soldier."

"It wasn't yer choice. In th' beginnin' ya mostly patched me an' 'Hide up, but after a point, ever'body had t' pick up a gun." Jazz continued to smile, though it grew a little sadder as he leaned a little closer on his knee to get a better look at her. "You were a great soldier, 'Kaela."

Of all of the compliments she had ever received in her life… that was probably the oddest and the least comforting. "Oh… thanks," she said, still struggling to comprehend that information.

Could she really pick up a gun? It was easy to hate the Decepticons, and want to see them dead. Mikaela had no problem with picking up a weapon to defend herself or those around her, as she had learned through experience. Still, the act of violence was new to her. And scary.

She could barely remember attacking that symbiote thing—Frenzy, if Ratchet's data had been correct—two years ago in Tranquility. She had acted instinctively to save her life and Sam's, but…

She shivered a little. She thought she had killed the monster. It was both satisfying and a little disconcerting how easy it had been to do; it was even more unnerving to realize how quickly she had altered her thought patterns to accept that those kinds of actions were necessary—to convert to a war mentality.

…Could she really do worse to things bigger and even scarier? Mikaela suddenly didn't want to find out. It seemed impossible. She felt better saving lives than taking them.

Then again… she might not have a choice.

"...I knew..." She looked up when Jazz spoke up again, his helm still tilted and the glow from his visor lower. He chuckled softly. "Eventually, you'd be gone. If not th' war, from age. Seems like it took me forever t' realize just how short a lifespan y'all have here."

Mikaela frowned. "I died because of the drones, didn't I?" she asked.

There was a pause. "...Yes. " Jazz's visor narrowed a little, the first real movement and hint of expression. If anything, it made him seem farther away, though. "Right after Will."

After Lennox. Mikaela didn't want to know the details on how she—the other Mikaela, or anyone else for that matter—had died. She was already haunted by the images of Jazz's own dead body, Hoist's nearly decapitated form, the four dead NEST soldiers, Optimus' lifeless body lying on the tarmac—

"I got t' bury ya, though," Jazz said. He shrugged faintly like the mechs did. "That always made me feel just a lil' better. Not by much, but it was better than Will or… Prowl."

"I'm sorry," Mikaela said, without thinking. She took deep breaths to steady her own emotions, which fought her self-control fiercely. She could only stare up at Jazz and try to absorb how much he had lost, what they had all lost. "I'm so sorry."
Jazz uncoiled a little and rolled his shoulders a little, smiling. "Don't be. That was a diff'rent life. Hardly yer fault."

Sure it wasn't her fault, but that didn't make her feel better. At all. His grief, her grief, the entire base's torrent of emotions swirling overhead like smog—it was all hitting her at once. Mikaela looked up at the ceiling, still fighting the choking sense of sadness in her chest.

She was sorry for everything, and it wasn't going to do a damn thing.

"What… are we going to do?" she asked, voice quaking. She looked back over at the mech, as if he could somehow know something that would change the situation, change their odds. Mikaela ran a hand through her hair, exasperated. "Optimus is dead. He died in your world, too. That… that means… we're going to lose. Doesn't it?"

Jazz looked like he was actually considering an answer besides, yes, we're screwed. Mikaela stared back with a dread-filled heart.

"Naw. Ya can't say anythin' fer sure," the silver mech in front of her said, waving a clawed hand dismissively. He had the nerve to smile a little again. "We're in a diff'rent world all t'gether. Just cause some events are th' same don't mean that ever'thin's gonna be th' same."

Mikaela's eyes narrowed. "But… it is all the same," she said, as desperate as she sounded. "Maybe at first glance," Jazz replied, tilting his helm again to the other side, the gesture mirroring a gentle smile. "But look at this world closer, an' you'll see."

At first, when she did that, all she saw was the misery they had to deal with. Optimus gone, the shard destroyed, Megatron—or Galvatron as they were calling him now – risen… it was all the freaking same. And if all these facts were the same now, what would change things, would stop it from ending the same, with everyone dying and the drones taking over? She was dejected enough to think that with the run of luck they'd had the past few weeks, they should be expecting those horrible things to appear tomorrow.

Taking a deep breath, Mikaela gripped her knees tightly, fingers pressing deeply into the denim fabric. It grounded her and stopped her mind from spiraling off into that depressive line of thought.

She had to look for things that weren't the same; she knew that. It was difficult at first, but…

There were differences. Mikaela blinked, stumbling a little mentally when she realized that the biggest difference was sitting right there in front of her.

The survivors being there was a huge twist to the story that could not be ignored, under any circumstances. That was the first tip off that things were obviously changed. Sure Jazz was alive while Optimus was dead (like before), but they'd never had a neutral Seeker around, or all these new mechs there. They were better organized here and had all of the information from Jazz's world to follow as well.

The survivors, the information they had from the future, the fact that time travel itself was even possible, the different paths that they had already taken in this new timeline—

Things… remained different. Maybe it seemed that the initial factors were the same, but not all of them were. Already there were enough differences from Jazz's world that events were changing, their paths were new.

As long the paths remained new, any outcome was possible, the meek little scientist inside of her told
"You're right. I was only looking at the surface," Mikaela said out loud, looking back over at Jazz. She nodded her head, trying to be firm with her own flip-flopping stomach. "If you beat the odds once, we can do it again."

That was just what she was going to have to tell herself, over and over, any time she started to focus only on the bad things that were the same.

They still had a chance. *They still had a chance.*

"Exactly," Jazz said, chuckling. Abruptly, he peered a little more closely at her, apparently curious. "Yer softer in this world than in mine. Yer not…"

Mikaela arched an eyebrow. "As traumatized?"

"Yeah." He laughed, the sound bitter. "If ya wanna know what yer war spirit was like, just look at my Rachel. I swear, th' day I met her, I thought it was you reincarnated."

"I was that angry?" Mikaela asked without thinking. She blushed immediately; that was rude, especially since Jazz was so close to the woman in question—

Jazz practically glowed with his smile, disregarding the negative comment. "You were *indomitable,*" he said, as if that were the most precious, awe-inspiring thing in the world. "Nothin' got ya down. Ya were the one who kept me goin' fer so long, 'Kaela. Slapped me silly whenever I got too down."

She laughed at that image. "I see." She could see herself being optimistic, but maybe not slapping a robot.

Despite being an enigma, Mikaela could see that Jazz was really happy to see her, to speak with her. After days of pure sadness and despair, even if she didn't know him as well as he might know a version of her, the familiarity was comforting beyond belief. She trusted him. She hoped they'd be friends, no matter what state the world would end up in.

"You keep trainin' wit' Ratchet, an' I know ya'll be just fine, Mikaela," he said, making her heart feel a little lighter. "We're not outta th' game yet. Far from it."

"Right," she said, nodding. She had to believe that.

Jazz stood up as quietly as Mikaela had ever heard a mech move before. It was fascinating. "I should probably check on my guys," he said, laughing quietly. "Thundercracker can only play babysitter peaceably fer so long."

Mikaela watched him start to head past her. "Jazz?" she called out, when he was a few feet away.

"Yup?" the silver mech asked, looing back at her.

She braced herself. "If you need to talk to someone… you know… outside your group…” She tucked her hands into her pockets a little more forcefully. "I'm not the same Mikaela you knew, but I'm still me."

For the first time that evening, a flash of something more expressive than a guarded smile went across his faceplates. His visor brightened a little and the edges seemed to draw back. Mikaela recognized his surprise finally, and then his quiet amusement. "…Thanks," he said, good-natured. "Yer a good friend."
That was a first, to be called that, after a lifetime of living such a mundane, peer-influenced existence. It felt great. "I can only hope," she said, smirking.

Jazz smiled and turned back, walking still-silently around the crates and out of sight.

Standing there alone, Mikaela glanced upwards and wondered if her other self had ever had the same doubts she had. She probably had. She wasn't that different. She couldn't have been.

Whether she only had ten years left, or eighty, Mikaela found herself knowing that if she could be brave in that other world—she could certainly be brave here.

*Here's to hoping, Optimus.*

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**End Interlude #3.**
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Prowl and Jazz have a chat, Rachel loses her shit, and then Keller makes a difficult, world-changing decision. Many thanks, Shantastic! :)

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
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See the end of the chapter for more notes

The whole base was like a tomb, and not just in a literal sense, Jazz thought mirthlessly. He barely heard any chatter, on radios or out loud, and the humans all looked as if they had just lost a fight to something monstrous, like a drone swarm.

It was worse than drones, however. They had lost something much more important than a group of men. Jazz felt bad for thinking that, because all life mattered…

But honestly, he didn't care if he was being selfish. Almost nothing could be worse than losing Prime—again—and having to pick up the pieces his absence left behind.

He wasn't surprised to be called in by the Autobots nearly two days after Optimus' death. Jazz had expected that he would be given some sort of debriefing, for all that he had been standing right there when the word of Optimus' death had come in. He'd spent the last couple of days listening to the other 'Bots mourning, his status as "outsider" preventing him from truly comforting them in any way. And although the loss of Optimus for a second time was painful, he found himself looking to the future, trying to guess what might happen next, where the enemy would make their next move and how their allies could counter it. Jazz knew that his family would only be truly safe if NEST and the Autobots managed to win the war, so he would do what he had to do to help them win. Whether or not they accepted what he had to offer.

He left his group in their hangar. Vortex and Thundercracker were resting; they had spent the last two days helping the humans to clear away the devastation that remained of the airfield and motor pool. Everyone else had found something to occupy their time. They were quieter than normal, but Jazz could see that they weren't panic stricken—just sober. With a nod to Arcee he headed for the command center. He could trust them to keep each other safe. His job now was to make sure that NEST and the Autobots used every scrap of information at their disposal to try to get the upper hand in the face of the oncoming war.

He saw Sideswipe as he passed Hangar A, the mech looking positively run-down compared to his usual self. All of the Autobots did, the shattering loss of Optimus had thrown them all off kilter. And although he'd expected this summons, eventually, Jazz was nervous about this meeting. He didn't know what Prowl wanted exactly, but he trusted his old friend. This was a time of great sorrow, but in previous times of distress, Prowl always managed to remain a pillar of support, no matter what.
The nerves came from his concern that this meeting would be a one-on-one with Prowl. He wasn't uncomfortable with the tactician, at least not very; Jazz actually thought he had worked through his most emotional response to Prowl, and over the past couple of weeks had seen that Prowl dealt with his own presence professionally, just as Jazz would have expected him to do. No, Jazz just didn't want to be alone with any Autobot—the conversation might easily turn to their fallen leader... a subject Jazz just didn't want to talk about. He hadn't even really discussed it with Thundercracker, who was respectfully silent about the whole thing.

Prowl had his back to the door and was working silently at the console. He was so focused on his work, likely a statistical analysis of the enemies' tactics in an attempt to come up with a strategy to fight them, that he didn't hear Jazz approach. Jazz didn't like how Prowl's doorwings were hiked up, quivering every so often with restrained frustration. Clearly, even the most reserved of the Autobots was having problems. Jazz braced himself.

Leaning into the room, Jazz rapped his clawed knuckle against the doorframe. "You rang, Prowl?" he asked, loud enough to shake the other mech from his reverie.

Prowl turned around and seemed honestly surprised to see the other mech there. The surprise was replaced with mild irritation, though Jazz knew it wasn't toward him.

"Jazz." Prowl placed his hand to his faceplates in a remarkably human gesture, undoubtedly adopted from Keller. "I apologize. I've been distracted and forgot that I called you."

Jazz smiled. "Hey, no problem," he said. He knew the Autobot would have been bogged down by everything, so it was surprising to see the mech even standing. Awkwardly, he decided to ask, "Ya okay?"

That gave the tactician pause, briefly. "...Truly, no, but that's irrelevant, isn't it?" Prowl shook his helm, briskly changing topics, thankfully. "I'm sorry for not updating your group on the most recent events."

Nodding, Jazz crossed his arms against his chassis. "Well, I'm here now. Explain away."

"I'm currently sharing commander duties with Ironhide," Prowl began, glancing at a datapad. He spoke as eloquently and precisely as ever; it made Jazz think he was back in pre-Earth days, when this sort of calm debrief would have been a common occurrence. "He will design the battle and defensive plans. He's already given Lennox and the humans an updated security plan, so we should be set on that front."

"I thought we were gonna be headed t' that island, ah, what's it called?" Jazz asked, going through the data he already had on the matter. "Diego Garcia?" An island base seemed like a bad idea to him, but from what he remembered Prowl saying, the United States' allies wanted their own foothold in the NEST operations, so the mechs had to be shared. It'd also give them a decent jump point into Asia and eastern Africa, if needed.

"We will be, but at the moment, we are still trying to figure out where each mech will go," Prowl said. He paused and gave Jazz a sympathetic look, his doorwings fluttering to a slightly lower rest point. To anyone else, he would simply look serious, but Jazz had long since mastered the ability to read him and recognize minute changes in his emotional state. "I can't promise that I will be able to keep your ten together, but I will try, Jazz. In the best case scenario, you would all remain at this base as civilian refugees, while we moved our military operations to other locations, to avoid a targeted attack. But based on recent... recent events, there is only a twelve point four percent chance of that scenario playing out."
Jazz stared at the other mech in surprise. The mere fact that Prowl, while dealing with a new command structure and his own grief at the loss of a close friend and leader, would think about the comfort and emotional wellbeing of the survivors… would put time and effort into making plans to keep them together… that was…

"Oh… thanks," he said. That felt rather pathetic and understated. He caught Prowl's gaze again and nodded. "I mean it. Thank you."

"No promises," Prowl replied, shaking his helm. He glanced up at the computers before them, grim. "That said, I will continue to be in charge of tactics and strategy, though I'm not sure how well a division of command will work." His doorwings quivered and Prowl cycled air through his vents sharply. "…Director Keller is deciding whether to make the announcement."

The Announcement. Jazz chuckled nervously; what an ominous thing to call it. This Keller had managed to avoid telling the public about the existence of alien robots over two years longer than his counterpart in Jazz's world…

But they didn't have a choice now. Jazz was glad the humans recognized this, because it was better they (metaphorically) bit the bullet and got this done now, before a devastating attack by Galvatron woke humanity up out of its ignorance.

"When?" he asked, shaking that terrible image out of his processors.

Prowl shrugged minutely. "Soon. I agree with his logic, that it is best to reveal it under our own terms rather than wait for an attack that we cannot cover up." Prowl's doorwings drooped even more. He sounded incredibly tired when he added, "I pray that Earth is ready."

"It ain't, but none of us has a choice," Jazz said, sober as anything. He could imagine the chaos the announcement would bring, simply because he had lived through one exactly like it. It was not going to be pretty, but it was necessary. He watched the Autobot leader carefully, thinking about his own position here. "What can I do, Prowler?"

For the safety of his family, he needed to help. But more than that, he wanted to help. He couldn't just stand by and let the Autobots suffer through all of this mess by themselves. He might not be able to do much, but if there was something, by Primus, he was going to do it.

Prowl glanced at him and then seemed to shy away a bit, focusing on the computer console. If Jazz had been anyone else, it would have seemed normal. However, he had spent many mega-vorns working closely with this mech. Jazz knew Prowl was stalling. Uh oh.

"…You offered your services as a Neutral informant and advisor," Prowl began, his cautious conversation setting off warning signs in Jazz's processors. "I know you have personal loyalties to consider now, but I cannot help but remember how great an Autobot you were."

Jazz stared, processors attempting to comprehend and rationalize what he had just heard. He had expected it—but—not so soon.

"What're ya … Yer askin' me t' rejoin?" he asked, still startled. He'd thought they only wanted him to be a liaison. That was a safe title, one that didn't stir the waters or shake the foundations of the family he was desperately trying to keep on even ground or the friendships he was trying to rekindle.

Prowl held a hand up, placating. "I'm asking simply that you become more involved in the tactical
planning we will undoubtedly need as time goes on. We need a solid plan to move forward with,” he said calmly, though Jazz could tell by the tension in his doorwings that he was just as nervous about this as Jazz was himself. "While I trust you, and Keller does too, to an extent, he fears political backlash if you are not a member of the Autobots. It's going to be difficult enough to get the public to trust us—if the media finds out that an alien who professes no allegiance to either side is handling sensitive information, it will make things more difficult for the President."

Primus-fragging politics. Jazz ran a hand over his faceplates. "Yeah, I get ya," he said, cycling a habitual sigh through his vents. "Man…"

Wildrider and Vortex would pitch a fit. Perhaps Rachel would too, considering her paranoia over Jazz getting too chummy with the Autobots. The others, especially Arcee, would understand and maybe even jump at the chance to do it themselves. Jazz prayed they all would understand. He prayed that he could understand, because he truly didn't know what he was going to do. What a mess.

Prowl was watching him silently, gauging his reaction. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to push you into a position you're uneasy with," he said after a moment, apologetic.

"I know, Prowl," Jazz said, feeling drained again. He glanced out the door before looking back at the other mech. "I need t' talk t' my people, but I think… I think we'll be cool. Everybody's shaken up an' lookin' fer a plan o' action. At least this way, they'll know someone who's makin' th'plan."

They stood for a moment in silence. Jazz was thinking primarily about how difficult it would be to broach the topic with his group—because he honestly didn't care what he was called – his loyalties wouldn't change with the reinstatement. He was much more worried about upsetting people. If his family agreed, he would do it. If they had problems with it and he couldn't convince them otherwise, well, he wouldn't. He couldn't do it, really.

Prowl had also been quiet, but Jazz noticed his doorwings moving again. He was distressed over something and suddenly Jazz realized it wasn't about him rejoining the Autobots.

The tactician hesitated and seemed to stare down at the computers again with a far-away expression. "…Perhaps… we should have looked more carefully at your data. This could have been prevented," he said, optics dim.

Oh, boy, so that's what it was about. Jazz steeled his spark. He scoffed loudly. "Aw, come on, Prowler. Even if we followed th' info me an' TC gave ya t' th' letter, what good would that have done us?" he asked, shaking his helm. It was difficult to think about, that they were so helpless, but it wasn't anyone's fault except the assassins themselves. "We followed it an' that put us in th' situation t' begin with! Prime was killed at a different place an' time in my world anyway. Ya couldn't have known. None o'us had any chance t' prevent it."

It wasn't fair or easy to think about, but it was true. They had the data to go on as a guide, but nothing more. It probably wouldn't help anyway, now that things were so different.

Prowl frowned, but seemed to understand what Jazz meant. "I don't know how we are going to do this without him…" he said, trailing off. His doorwings had been down, but suddenly perked up and his expression became more controlled. "But I have faith in our army and in the humans."

Jazz chuckled at that last sentiment. "Yeah. Trust me on this one: never underestimate those lil' guys," he said, smiling a bit. "They know how t' mess up plans, an' scare th' scrap outta logic lovin' mechs like you."
"Indeed," Prowl replied. He made a face, surprisingly falling into the banter. Maybe they all needed to just... stop thinking about what had happened, Jazz realized. It was becoming too much. "I get processor aches just dealing with a few of their supposedly more intelligent members."

"How is yer head, by the way?" Jazz asked. At Prowl's confused helm-tilt, he added, "I mean, I haven't seen ya really fritz out from yer logic processors freezin' up." Well, outside the attack on the base, but even then, it had stopped rather quickly.

"Oh, I have crashed before. I frightened Keller and Lennox quite a bit the first time it happened here," Prowl replied, touching his helm lightly. He smiled, though, in quiet amusement. "I suppose I am adapting slowly to the oddness here. Most often I just... ignore them."

"Ha!" Jazz chuckled. "Well, true. I remember that time we got marooned with Springer's crew back on that Delta-class moon. After th' first two freezes, you pretty much just completely ignored th' lot o' them. Man, Springer was pissed! You wouldn't even answer him after th' first joor!"

Prowl's optics slightly narrowed as he smiled back, doorwings going up. "Ah, yes, that. If I recall, I turned off my audio sensors. That was the only way to ignore their constant goading."

Jazz burst out laughing. Part of his cheer came from the fact that despite being from different worlds, they shared a significant portion of their timelines. The familiarity was a comfort.

"I'm surprised we both remember that," Prowl said as he leaned against the door, obviously noticing the same thing.

"Well, our worlds only split after 2007, so everythin' before that's th' same, I'd imagine," Jazz said, shrugging.

Prowl nodded. "True." His optics grew more distant. "Which is quite a long time."

"...Yeah." Jazz clenched and then unclenched his fists. "Yeah, it is."

The awkward pause that continued after that was excruciating. Jazz looked at the ceiling before looking back down at Prowl, who was more out of his element than Jazz was, probably.

Shit.

"So... ah..." Prowl shifted on his pedes, giving Jazz a searching look, still gauging his reactions about the matter. "Will you take on a temporary role, at the very least? We will need your help and I only want to make sure we can avoid unnecessary political drama."

Jazz nodded, trying to shrug off the awkwardness. "Sure. I mean, yeah, I can just double check t' make sure it won't send anybody off th' deep end, but I think it'll be cool." He paused and gave Prowl another nod. "Um, yeah. It should be fine." Primus, why was this suddenly so awkward?

"I can't reinstate you to your former rank," Prowl added quickly, looking nervous. That quickly faded back into a professional stoicism. "I mean, I could, but I doubt it would be seen in a favorable light."

Jazz had to chuckle at that. "Yeah, I don't think Ironhide or th' twins would be very happy with that." He nodded stiffly. "No, it's not a problem. I don't mind workin' under you. I never did."

Even before they had gotten together, Jazz had always admired Prowl's leadership. He was a good mech with a good spark—and the brains to get them all through the worst of times, or at least, as many of them as he could save. He could handle Prowl giving out orders, even if it was awkward,
simply because he knew that Prowl would never put anything before the lives of his troops.

"Alright," Prowl said, nodding simply. "Thank you, Jazz. I don't think I could do this without your help."

"You're a great commander, Prowl," Jazz said, meaning it. The Autobots might have lost something irreplaceable, but Prowl was still an asset they could rely on wholly.

Prowl hesitated. "I've never had my faith shaken quite like this. I will try, however," he replied. Lifting his helm, Prowl stared straight into Jazz's visor and smiled, the gesture honest—innocent. "So thank you for being here."

For eons, Jazz had stared back into those blue optics and taken comfort in that honesty. Other mechs had been put off by his abrupt and serious manner, but Jazz knew that those who were lucky or smart enough to look past the cold exterior would see a pure spark. It belonged to a mech who did what he had to and never stopped trying—because he cared. He really did. Anyone who said otherwise was a fool, Jazz knew.

Standing there before him, Jazz could tell this mech was the same as the one he had always known. That honesty, that care, that solid frame that made up one of the strongest and most beautiful creatures he had ever had the chance to meet and love—it was all Prowl.

Jazz started to tremble.

It wasn't fair.

"Jazz?" Prowl asked, optics narrowed now in growing concern at the state of the other mech.

That was enough. Jazz stepped back several feet, not caring if he was obvious. He had to get out of that room. He had to get away from him.

"Nothing," Jazz said shortly. "Nothin'. I..." He almost couldn't break contact with Prowl's optics, but with one last mental shove, he did, turning around completely. "I'll talk t' ya later."

He left quickly without another word and he didn't hear Prowl say anything in reply. He was being ridiculous and had probably upset Prowl too—but he couldn't stay. He had to just get away and let his processors clear because—

Frag it. Frag it, frag it, frag it—

Jazz had to stop at the end of the corridor, still shaking fiercely. He clenched his clawed hands together and tried to get a hold on his emotions, which were skyrocketing everywhere now.

He felt guilt. He felt grief. He felt confusion, and doubt, and unforgiving realization—

Primus help him, he felt love.

Get it t'gether, mech, he told himself harshly, engines snarling quietly. He shoved away from the wall, mind on fire. He couldn't do this now.

This wasn't his world, or his Prowl—even though he knew more than ever that he was the same Prowl. That was irrelevant. He wasn't with Prowl—he was with Thundercracker, and the other nine survivors—and he was happy with them.

He was happy, damn it.
Jazz fought hard to keep the burning shame under control as he stumbled back to Hangar B. He had to keep up face, because he couldn’t let his own problems start (or actually continue) to affect his friends. They had to be calm, collected… rational.

He had to be rational.

When he reached his friends and saw they were all looking at him expectantly for an explanation, he could not look at Thundercracker. He just couldn’t.

Instead, he focused on their future and his own—

"Alright, you guys. Listen up."

He prayed it would be the right choice, at least for now.

---

Kass listened intently until Jazz had finished speaking, taking in everything, and she tried to remain logical as she digested what he had said.

This would be… interesting, to say the very least.

"…So, that's it," Jazz concluded. He waited nervously as the others went over what he had just told them, from the new command structure of the Autobots, to his new position as an Autobot (technically) and then to his request for the rest of them to start actively offering their skills to NEST.

"That's it?" Barns asked, frowning.

The silver mech nodded. "Yup."

"You are to become Autobot," Wildrider stated, blunt. He sent Jazz a suspicious look. "They accepted you back so easily, yes?"

"They're kind of desperate, 'Rider. I am, too," Jazz said, attempting to sound light-hearted. He shrugged. "I don't care about a rank or a name, man. Y'all know that. I just want us t'win."

It made sense…sort of. The humans would be very nervous about a non-aligned mech handling the plans and deployment of the Autobots and their own soldiers. Kass knew the trust issues between their species would only be more strained if that were the case. They had to approach their public image very, very carefully at this rate. She trusted Jazz not to abandon them in favor of the Autobots; it was all they could do in this case.

"It's the right thing," Arcee said quietly. "I should as well."

"Why?" Wildrider shot at her, glaring.

Arcee glared back. "Do you really have to ask?"

Jazz waved his hands. "Hey, hey, no fightin'," he said shortly. "It ain't open season yet, Arcee, so no joinin' fer anyone else fer a while. They just want me t' be directin' more o' this intel t' th' soldiers, ya know? TC, they'd take your help, too. You got th' 'Con details more than I do."

Thundercracker rumbled lowly. "I will not take the Autobot name," he said, shaking his helm. "But tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"Even if Prowl tells ya t' do somethin'?" Jazz prompted.
The jet paused and seemed to shrink a bit. "Fine," he said sullenly. Jazz beamed.

"What about us?" Barns asked, pointing at himself. Kass stood up straighter, wanting to know just that as well. "We wish to help."

"I don't know if they'll let ya guys do much yet, but in time, I think we'll be needin' all hands on deck," Jazz said, nodding. "Kass, Ratchet would be real impressed with yer med skills, so ya could probably talk t' him today or tomorrow about workin' as a medic, if ya'd like."

Talk to Ratchet? Alone? Kass did not relish that sort of job opportunity, but…

Kass sighed. "At least there's that," she murmured. She'd prefer not having to do anything, but if the need came, she'd be there. Wheeljack had taught her well enough that she might be able to do something in terms of repairs.

"What about me?" Wildrider demanded.

"And me?" Danny asked, suddenly, causing most of them to send her looks of surprise. She fidgeted. "I… I wanna help."

Jazz smiled kindly at her. "Well, I'm sure somethin' will come up, Dan. Thanks."

"This is fucking stupid."

Kass was as surprised as the rest of them were to hear that. Turning, Kass saw Rachel was standing and glaring at Jazz. The blond woman looked ready for a fight. What Kass couldn't figure out was why.

"Rachel?" Jazz prompted, shocked. Everyone peered at the human in question, who only seemed to grow angrier by the second.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she demanded. She ignored Danny's shock and Thundercracker displeasure as he made a tsking sound. "This isn't a joke, Jazz. Why the hell are you bothering with these people?"

Jazz stared at her and Kass could practically hear his own defensiveness rise up like a wave of water. Oh, bloody hell. "Um, sorry?" he shot back, confused.

All at once, Kass knew this wasn't Rachel just lashing out in confusion or mistrust of NEST's intentions. This was Rachel actually pissed off—and that wasn't good. At all.

"Why are we still freaking here?" Rachel asked, her voice rising. She gestured behind her, toward the door. "We should be making plans to leave, not hanging around like the Autobots' new body fodder!"

"And where would we go?" Jazz asked, exasperated.

Something snapped. "I don't know!" Rachel shouted. She made a strange, jerking movement as she stumbled away from their circle, dodging past the wide-eyed Danny. "For fuck's sake, I don't know!"

"Holy slag, why are you yellin'? !" Jazz yelled back, standing up in irritation. Kass groaned internally as she realized that this was quickly spiraling into disaster. Once both Jazz and Rachel got started on some tirade with opposing opinions, it was worse than when Arcee and Wildrider fought.
Rachel spun around and gave him a fierce look. "I need to get out of here. Right now." Taking a deep breath, she shook her head. "I can't... I can't stay here. We can't stay here!"

Jazz made another exasperated sound. "Rachel, we can't just walk on out."

"Why not?" Rachel challenged. "We move, it's what we do. We should move, right now, Jazz."

Kass' hands found each other and her nails bit into her skin, she was holding on so tightly. While she almost wanted to agree with Rachel, because standing still was terrifying, she had to agree with Jazz. She felt sick listening to her friends argue, but there was no stopping this train wreck now, not until one of them gave up. Unfortunately, neither mech nor human were known to back down.

Silently, Kass prayed it would blow over, soon.

"The military has the right to detain us if they think we're gonna cause problems," Jazz snapped. He was standing up now too, so it was rather intimidating to see the two face off with their vastly differing heights. Then again, Kass knew Rachel could hold her own quite well.

Said-human turned even redder. "I'll give them a problem if they want it—none of us wanted to come here!" she yelled.

"That's not how this works, Rachel," he said, grave. "Come on, stop screamin'—"

Rachel sent him a disgusted look. "What are you, on their side? You get your friends back and you think we should all just play nice? FUCK YOU, JAZZ!" she yelled.

Jazz flinched back, insulted. "Hey—!"

The human didn't let him finish. She pointed at him in vicious accusation. "No, screw you. You think just because we have a chance at fixing things means that we're going to fix every fucking problem we have? WHEELJACK IS DEAD," she screamed, voice hoarse, growing louder as she continued. "GODDARD IS DEAD. EVERYONE ANY OF US EVER CARED ABOUT IS FUCKING DEAD. THIS IS NOT OUR WORLD." She shook violently. "It will NEVER be our world!"

"I know that, Rachel, Primus!" Jazz cried, trying to cut her off. He held his hands out defensively. "I'm not trying t' replace anyone, an' I know that things can't be fixed fer us. But we can help fix th' world—!"

Rachel drew up to her full height, unable to stop the tears that broke free from her eyes. "SINCE WHEN DID THE WORLD MEAN MORE TO YOU THAN US? ! THAN ME? ! THAN THUNDERCRACKER? !" she demanded, gesturing at herself and the other mech. "THIS ISN'T OUR PROBLEM TO FIX!"

Jazz stared at her, stunned speechless. Rachel took deep gulping breaths; Kass could see her coming apart at the seams. To her other side, Wildrider and Arcee were exchanging similar shocked looks, unwilling to say anything, because frankly, there was no way anyone was going to jump in now.

"You just want your old life back, but you can't have it back, because this one isn't the same as the one you lost," Rachel said, crying. "These people aren't the people you lost. I want my family back too, Jazz, but that's not how this works. I want...I want 'Jack back, and Goddard, and my mom, and my dad, my sisters—but that's not how it works." Her words and her eyes turned simultaneously colder. "I want to do what's best for us, not them, so we have to leave."

"And go where?" Thundercracker suddenly interrupted, just as alarmed as Jazz was. He shook his
helm. "This isn't the same place, Rachel. Life is different here."

Rachel glared back at him. "We adapted to hell, so what's so different about adapting to heaven?" she demanded sarcastically.

Jazz was clearly clutching at straws, still trying to calm Rachel down. "I can't just leave when we could be fixin'—we could save Earth by helpin' th' Autobots take precautions against th' drones, against Galvatron," he said. His visor narrowed. "You want t' walk out on that? Because if we do, what's stopping this world from becoming th' one we left behind, where our families an' our friends died, fer no reason at all?"

"And what if it's inevitable?" Rachel shot right back. "What if we're just from the past and us coming here won't change a damn thing? What's the point?"

At that moment, Jazz seemed to give up trying to calm her down. "The point is that if th' world goes t' Pit an' all we have is th' same world as th' one we left—at least I'll know I tried t' fix it," he said, angry.

That… was probably not the best thing to say. Kass winced. "Enjoy being a hero then. I can see that's what's more important," Rachel snarled. She threw her hands up in the air. "Fuck this."

Jazz suddenly flinched, realizing his mistake. "Rachel—!" he called out, taking a step closer to stop her from moving away.

The human spun around when she saw his hand reaching. She leaped backwards, cursing. "DON'T TOUCH ME!" Jazz withdrew, as if struck. She continued to stumble the other direction, fixing her guardian with a fierce, wild look. "You wanna be a hero? Start looking after your friends. Your REAL ones!"

With that one last, hoarse remark, Rachel turned on her heel and fled the hangar. Kass gasped and took off after her without thinking. She didn't look back to see what Jazz did, or what he looked like after that interaction, but that wasn't important right now.

Rachel was a fast runner, but only when at the top of her game. Her tears slowed her down and Kass caught up to the blond woman at the edge of Hangar A. Kass stopped a few feet away, watching her friend stumble and then stop moving, falling down to a crouch, because she couldn't hold herself up any longer.

"He told me he'd leave the All Spark behind for me," Rachel was saying, gasping through sobs. "He told me that he would never love anything more than us, than me." She covered her face with her hands. "He's just like my mom. He's just like my fucking mom."

Kass watched with a pained expression. "Rachel…"

"I don't want to be here anymore," Rachel sobbed. "Why couldn't we have just died with Wheeljack? I don't want to be here."

"Rachel!" Kass exclaimed, horrified. She walked up quickly and crouched next to her friend. "Rachel, stop that. Stop saying things like that."

Rachel… Rachel had never said anything like that. It wasn't right or normal. Something was clearly wrong, more so than just a simple fight.

The other woman just cried. "Everything is so fucked up," she said, shaking her head. "I can't do this. I can't."
"You're going to have to," Kass said firmly, grasping Rachel's shoulder. "Rachel, come on. You can't give up fighting now. We're not doomed."

"The hell we aren't!" Rachel exclaimed. She gave Kass a desperate look. "Everything is happening like it did before. Everyone's going to die, again, and Jazz just wants to run face first into it like he did last time! Well, guess what? He did that last time too and see where that got him!"

Kass frowned. "It got him a family," she said quietly.

Rachel closed her eyes and shook her head. "He's going to get us all killed."

"He's trying to save us," Kass replied. She sat down in front of the other woman, hands on her knees. "Rachel, Jazz is doing what he thinks is right. What he thinks will save us."

"He just wants to be an Autobot again," Rachel spat, bitter.

"He just wants to save us," Kass said, shaking her head. "And if that meant becoming a Decepticon, I think he'd do it."

That wasn't an exaggeration. Kass could see how desperate Jazz was, how he looked at them all. She could see how afraid he was, not for his own life, but for the lives of his friends. He would do anything for them. Certainly returning to his old post as an Autobot soldier was the easier route, but Kass knew that Jazz would do anything short of hurting one of their ten to make sure they all survived.

It might be painful, Kass realized, but they had to accept this. All of them, ex-Decepticons included. It was either join the Autobots and go out fighting… or just sit there until Galvatron came to kill them all anyway.

Kass was not going to die without a fight. That she was very certain of.

"Of all the people to give up fighting, you were the last one I'd suspect," she said quietly.

Rachel looked up, eyes full of raw anger and fear. Kass stared back, bracing her heart.

"We were born with war in our blood," Kass continued. She smiled thinly. "If any humans on this planet have a reason to fight against the Decepticons now, it's us, Rachel."

For their families. For the friends they had lost. For her brother, her parents… for Rachel's own siblings and parents. For every scar they had burned into their bodies, physically and mentally.

They had reasons to fight.

Rachel stared at her friend, mouth partially open with words undoubtedly ready to let fly. But Rachel said nothing. She stared at Kass in silence, with red and tormented eyes.

Kass smiled a little brighter and clasped Rachel's hand in her own.

"Even if we die, we'll die together," she said. "And that's a death worth dying, don't you think?"

It was the only death worth anything, really.

Kass sat there with her until Vortex finally peeked his head around the corner of the hangar, wary. Kass left Rachel with him, knowing they were at the point where Vortex probably should be the one comforting her. Then again, Rachel wasn't one to accept comfort. She'd appreciate his silent support more.
"Is she okay?" Danny asked, concerned when Kass walked back inside their hangar. Everyone looked like they were ready for another outburst, this one having shocked them by its suddenness.

Kass nodded; they'd get past this, just like everything else.

With Vortex taking care of Rachel, Kass turned back to Jazz, who was standing there awkwardly with Thundercracker. The smaller mech looked quite lost, which made Kass feel bad for him.

Jazz looked as run down as he had after Prime was killed. He watched as Kass approached, wary. "...I messed up," he said.

Kass sighed. "No. She's just as scared as we all are," she said, shaking her head. "Jazz, you do what you have to. We're all behind you, in one way or another, including Rachel." She glanced back at the doors, where she could just barely see Vortex sitting with her friend. "Just give her time."

"I can do that," Jazz said, sighing heavily. He ran a hand over his faceplates. "Primus."

Thundercracker clasped Jazz's shoulders, supportive. "You're doing fine," he said.

Jazz frowned grimly. "I'm not tryin' hard enough. None of us are. Not yet." The mech looked at the three of them and seemed to grow more severe. "But I'm sort of afraid of th' moment we're gonna have to."

Kass tucked her hands under her arms and shivered a little. "...Same."

They would take this step-by-step, one at a time. If that wasn't enough, well, they would have done all they could. She would be ready for the next strike and she knew—despite their resistance toward joining any particular army—her friends would be ready too, even Rachel. She could see it in every optic and eye that their ten were ready to at least defend themselves. Kass hoped Rachel, Vortex and Wildrider would be able to see the value in defending people outside their group—because even if this wasn't their true home, it was all they had left now.

Steadying her heart, Kass started to plan her own next move: confronting a medic.

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The Pentagon
Washington, DC

More than sixty years ago, when he had been a very small boy, he had sat with his parents and his brother and sisters and listened in silence to the radio broadcast made by FDR following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He had still been too young to really understand the meaning of what they were headed into, but looking back as an adult, he could understand what he had heard with far greater meaning.

Now more than ever, John Keller surmised with some despair.

He had lived through six major wars—specifically humanity-driven wars. He had served in office for two of them, though technically neither of them was over, yet. But now he was confronted by the reality of a seventh war, a war that was unlike anything he had ever dreamt of facing. Keller sometimes wondered what his father, or men from Roosevelt's era, would say about this latest war, one which would be waged between men and monsters. He wondered if any of the current world leaders would make a speech, not only worth remembering, but a speech that would actually have ears to listen to it... and future minds to remember it after the conflict had ended.
That last hope seemed impossible. Keller knew plenty of leaders would have things to say, himself included, and there were still people now to listen… but to think future generations would be alive to know about it was difficult to fathom when he considered just how dangerous of a situation they were in.

He didn't particularly want to live on in history as one of the people who would have to break the truth to the American people and to the rest of the world, but it was a part of his job. He had known since signing on as Director of National Intelligence that one day, either he or his successor would have to make the call. He knew he would have to face the American people—and the people of the entire planet—and tell them the truth.

Sitting alone in his office, Keller had the opportunity to dwell on what the truth was: they were facing a war like nothing they had ever seen before. A war between species rather just between countries. A war with aliens.

People were going to panic. Hollywood and common jokes aside, Keller knew what sort of chaos something like this would cause. His parents had seen it during the panic a simple radio broadcast made in 1938 could incite. Now, with the dawn of video and live news casting… Keller knew the panic would be greater. Humanity could see the aliens and see the devastation the Decepticons would bring to cities soon enough. Panic would not be avoidable.

And whether those who were panicking knew it or not, they had a good reason to. Prowl had been working tirelessly to get the Galaxus and Hyperion to Earth; the reinforcements aboard those two ships were ultimately their only hope when it came to staving off a full out invasion by Decepticon forces. They had no idea how many 'Cons were actually on Earth and their silence—Megatron's silence—was nerve-wracking. Keller found himself staring at his phone, waiting for the call that an attack was in progress.

But in their most recent discussion, Prowl hadn't had good news. The Galaxus had been forced to slow its progress due to an asteroid situation. The Hyperion had instead increased speed, forgoing a scheduled stop to resupply at an Autobot base, in order to make up for the other ship. However, that still didn't answer the ugly question hanging over them: where was Nemesis?

Keller had nightmares thinking about a Decepticon warship arriving in Earth orbit before the Autobot ships. Although their side had larger numbers of mechs aboard their warships, it was unlikely they would be able to overpower the Nemesis, Prowl had warned; the Decepticons had several trines of Seekers, which would easily make up for the discrepancy in size between their forces. And Nemesis was a terrifying weapon on her own, so they had to pray that Hyperion would reach Earth before the other ship. It was their only real shot at preventing a huge influx of Decepticons to Earth.

Not that that did much for the Decepticon problem they already had. Keller was constantly getting updates from various intel sources around the globe, focusing on the increase in sightings of unknown rogue aircraft and various machinery that kept popping up in either viral footage or even in press releases from suspicious countries. He had dodged several awkward confrontations with Putin and Ahmadinejad's people for the last two weeks, because until they made the aliens' presence public, there was nothing he could say.

Now was the time. Now was the only time they could actively approach their own people, their planet, without the immediate danger of Decepticons raining down overhead. The window of temporary peace was in danger of collapsing at any moment, so… Keller knew he had to make his move.

Trembling, he prayed for strength as he called in his clerical aide. The young man came in with a
respective expression, as if he understood the DNI had the weight of the world on his shoulders. And that it wasn't even an exaggeration to say so.

Keller gestured at the aide weakly. "Call POTUS and tell him we're going public," he said. He closed his eyes. "Tonight. Organize the press conference. Make sure we have coverage from the international news outlets."

The aide nodded and quietly slipped out of the door, shutting it soundly. Keller stared at the wood grain and thought—about his past and what would become his future.

With a heavy heart, Keller closed his eyes again.

Today would again be a day of infamy—a day the old man in him hoped would be remembered for all time.

End Chapter 23.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, Kass decides to be useful and Sam makes a rather unfortunate mistake.

A/Ns:
- Yeah, Rachel's got issues. For further clarification of her behavior here if you don't remember why, check out chapters 10 and 32 of Fallout for more lovely freak outs.
- Jazz what are you doing
- Yes, Keller is going to tell the world about the aliens. Yes, it's going to happen before next chapter. No, you won't get to read what he says to the public in whole, because speeches are awkward to write in fiction haha.
- "a simple radio broadcast" – a reference to the 1938 radio broadcast of Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds," which was received with such intensity by the public, who believed it to be a real newscast of an alien invasion in the middle of the night, there are reports that people actually killed themselves in fear. Needless to say, it's a rather poignant example of mass hysteria at its finest.
- "infamy" – quoted from FDR's "Pearl Harbor Address to the Nation"
Hey, guys, as a quick notice: I apologize if this story seems so overly dark and depressing that it's difficult to continue reading at this point. The only thing I'd like to point out (aside from the title, which clearly reads, "apocalypse") is that the pacing of this story drags a lot of the drama out and I'm sorry about that. We're only halfway through the story, mind you, so don't give up on me/the story just yet. Yes, there are more depressing things that await us (particularly in chapter 26 coming up), but this story was never about happy endings or Hollywood action flick plot-lines where the heroes are invincible. It's about survivors of the apocalypse finding a second chance to fix things, or fail again trying. And, of course, never forget the core series theme as I have mentioned before: "Never let go of hope." :) That's not just directed at the characters.

ANYWAY! Today, Kass does some networking and Sam makes a big, big mistake. :D AWWW YEAH. I'm excited, guys. Thank you so much for editing this, Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEST Compound
Plumas National Park, California

"If ya got somethin' t' offer, all I ask is that ya make th' offer once."

Jazz's plea had been simple and straightforward. Kass couldn't argue with the logic that they had to at least make a small gesture of support toward NEST in this time of need. Everyone was counting on the Autobots and NEST to succeed in this war, so Kass couldn't find it in herself to sit on the sidelines when she could be giving them some form of aid.

At first, she wasn't sure what that meant for her personally; all of their weapons had been taken from them when they arrived on the base, and it wasn't like they were facing off against the Decepticons in a literal battle now. They were still stuck in this limbo of non-action until they could validate more intel or until the Decepticons made their next move. However, the more she thought about it, the more she'd realized that she did have a skill worth mentioning, to at least one mech on the compound.

The med-bay was located in Hangar C and wasn't that large. Only three moderate-sized mechs could fit in there at a time and there was only one examining table. Kass had only seen it in passing when she had gone with Bluestreak for his incoming check-up from the Autobot medic, Ratchet. The mech was… intimidating and Kass had walked away from that encounter wary of approaching him—ever. Jazz had made a point to assure all of them that Ratchet's "bark was worse than his bite," especially
when it came to humans, so Kass knew she didn't have any excuse not to slip away from her group that day and talk with him.

She wasn't entirely sure if she was really allowed to walk around alone, but it didn't matter because she didn't run into anyone—Autobot or human. She had decided not to bring any of her mech friends along, simply because she wanted to avoid any appearance of aggression or confrontation in the tiny med-bay. Ratchet already seemed volatile enough without adding in the presence of a mech he might consider to be an enemy. The whole base was quiet, which wasn't surprising when she considered what had happened a few days ago. Their own group was still quietly and uncomfortably working through the aftermath of the latest "incident" between Rachel and Jazz, which had been sparked by the loss of Optimus Prime.

The med-bay door was open and even from a distance Kass could hear both the heavy sounds of a mech's footsteps and the lighter clatter of mechanical tinkering filtering out of it. Upon reaching the threshold, she saw Ratchet first, moving around the examining table, muttering short things to himself. He sounded grumpy, but then he always did, Kass realized. She saw a mech lying on the examination table—it was the Autobot that had been damaged in Mexico.

Standing there awkwardly for a moment, Kass braced herself.

"Hello," she said, as loudly as she thought was needed. The room was rather tall, so she was afraid her voice might not carry as far as the mechs at the table. Thankfully, it seemed like it was enough. Ratchet flinched and turned around in surprise, while Hound continued to lie on the table. Seeing the dark optics, Kass realized the mech was offline, probably so that Ratchet could work on his injuries more easily, without causing him undue pain.

Ratchet stared down at the human in the doorway, at first surprised, and then suspicious.

"…Kassandra Hall," he stated. He tilted his head at his unexpected visitor. "What can I do for you?"

Stomach full of butterflies, Kass tried to smile back politely. "I…" she began, voice wavering. She cleared her throat and walked into the med-bay properly. Acting scared was silly. "I wanted to offer my assistance."

That earned her a strange look. "What?" Ratchet asked, baffled.

Kass laughed and clasped her hands behind her, trying to keep from fidgeting. "I know quite a bit about mech repairs, although I'm sure they're all rudimentary concepts," she said simply. "Jazz asked us to offer to help NEST in any way we could. Aside from fighting, my only useful skill is basic field repairs, so I thought I would talk with you."

She didn't have any talent at strategy or war plans, and her art wouldn't help anyone on a battlefield, but she could certainly do repairs. That had been her job for years with her friends, and considering how many mechs they had running around now… well, she had a feeling they would be needing more medical hands.

They would always need medics in a war, after all.

Ratchet frowned, however, and Kass's stomach dropped. "I already have an assistant in training," he said, turning away again. While not cruel, his voice left no room for an argument. "Don't trouble yourself."

Kass hesitated when she realized that he had dismissed her without even a thought. Clearly, he had immediately decided that her offer was rubbish, and put her out of his mind; he probably planned to
ignore her until she went away. That wouldn't do. Even if this was an easy way out (it wasn't like she hadn't tried), Kass didn't want to go back with nothing to tell Jazz. And she knew that she could do this, that she could help him save lives.

"It would be more troublesome to do nothing, sir," Kass said, causing Ratchet to pause again, both of them surprised at her tenacity. "My mother taught me how to repair machines. Wheeljack taught me how to apply that to mechs." She looked up at him plaintively. "Please. Let me do something."

That at least bought her more time to argue her case, and a little interest on the medic's part. "How much do you know?" Ratchet asked, glaring. He gestured down at Hound's leg. "Do you know how to repair en ergon lines?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Kass moved a bit closer, folding her hands together again. "It's not exactly the most fun job. And if I had to do that, that meant Wheeljack was busy with more severely injured people, so that was never a good sign for us." In fact, the less she'd had to do it, the better.

"Hm." Ratchet continued to work on the mech's side. "Damaged plating connectors?"

Kass moved even closer to see what he was doing. "Soldering. It's not that different from working on automobiles."

Ratchet's engines revved loudly and he seemed irritated. "It's entirely different. Our exostructures are made of a—," he started.

"Non-biological coagulating metal that acts like a self-repairing epidermis," Kass interrupted. She smiled pleasantly at his surprise. "Wheeljack taught me well."

The medic stared at her with a squinting expression that reminded her of how Arcee would look at Wildrider when he was being particularly obnoxious. Blushing, Kass held her ground. Ratchet glanced back at his patient and back at her.

"How would you go about fixing this injury?" he demanded gesturing at Hound's leg.

Kass blinked in surprise and got closer. She couldn't quite see the wound from her angle, so Ratchet (with a heavy sigh of disdain) offered his hand. Being picked up by an unknown mech was rather unsettling, but Kass was trying to be professional.

"Shrapnel needs mini-mag tools to get the smallest bits out," she replied, peering down now at the unconscious mech. The plating had been removed by Ratchet obviously, but she could see tinier holes and pierced tubing on the inside, so it had to be shrapnel. She smiled up at Ratchet. "Or gloved human hands."

Ratchet's sour expression returned. "Clever," he said sarcastically. He gently put her down on the end of the exam table however, so Kass was hoping that his mood was, as she heard Jazz describe, normal.

"Sorry," she said anyway, standing back to let him get to work. He obviously wanted her to watch if he had put her on the table instead of the floor, so she felt comfortable standing in silence.

"If you want to help, you're going to have to get in line," he said suddenly, causing her to look up. Ratchet did the mech version of an eyebrow raise. "Mikaela Banes already signed on for apprenticeship."

Ah, yes, Mikaela Banes. Kass wasn't too shocked by that, from what she knew of the other young woman. Jazz had always spoken fondly of her and said that his Mikaela had been a field medic. And
during the attack on the base over a week ago, Mikaela had seemed very capable under stress. Kass certainly didn't want to step on any toes by offering her help, however.

"Oh, I don't want to shove anyone out of the way," Kass replied, holding her hands up weakly. "I just want... I'd like to help when I'm needed."

Because if she had to sit there helplessly and do nothing, she would go mad. She had the skills to offer and these people were going to need the help.

Ratchet hummed thoughtfully. "That's acceptable." He suddenly laughed shortly, surprising her. It was a grim sound. He focused on his work. "Who knows? We may need you sooner than later."

Kass wilted a bit, both in relief that he wasn't shoving her away, but also in mild despair.

"I'd rather you not need me at all," she admitted, glum.

Turning, Ratchet looked at her, and then looked back down at Hound in silence. "Even worlds without war need medical care, Kassandra."

Kass nodded and sighed quietly. What was there to say? She hoped they wouldn't need her, or even Mikaela. She knew that was a foolish hope.

Instead she watched him as he quickly and efficiently removed the shrapnel from Hound's side and started patching tubes. She found herself intrigued by what he was doing. He was using a lot of different tools she didn't recognize, though that wasn't very surprising. Wheeljack had never been a real medic, despite how much he had helped them all in the long run, so Ratchet must have had a lot more gadgets to help him fix even the most minor of injuries. Somewhere in NEST's confiscated supplies were Kass' soldering tools, so she wondered if she could ask Ratchet if she could finally have those back. Maybe they might have been a bit pathetic compared to his tools, but if they could improve them—

A long clanging sound caused Kass to jump. Even Ratchet flinched and turned around to seek out the source of it. Kass saw another mech at the door with a raised fist, so he must have been knocking—

And then Kass stopped. Everything stopped, when she realized who it was.

"Ratchet, I just decoded Perceptor's report from the Galaxus, and you'll never believe what's his readouts are saying!" Wheeljack—not theirs, but the new one—exclaimed excitedly. He rounded on Ratchet, who glanced furiously between him and the exam table where Kass stood watching. Wheeljack went on, oblivious. "The gamma ray burst he was tracking has quite possibly the most intricate leveling I have ever—oh."

He finally spotted her. It was almost humorous how quickly Wheeljack's glee melted to at first horror and then an awkward expression more suited for a man who just walked into the ladies' lavatory. Kass fought a laugh, which most likely would have been just a tad hysterical, as the masked mech seemed to literally take a step back and make as if to rush right back out the door.

It might have been simpler to just let him run, but Kass... Kass had had enough nights to think this confrontation over.

"Ah, wait," she called out, causing Wheeljack to flinch, halting, and Ratchet to look worriedly back at her. Kass forced herself to smile, trying to let them both know she wasn't about to have a fit. "You don't need to run away every time you see us."
While it might have been easier for him to do just that, it wasn't fair. It wasn't his fault—any of it. She couldn't begrudge him for something that was beyond his control. None of her group should do that, she had realized soon after Danny's break down. It was only fair that she let him know that, too.

The tall mech across from her had such a wounded look to his optics. Kass could easily read his emotions through them and his earfins' low glowing. It pained her terribly to have to look at that same face, knowing the person behind it was so very different than the one that had meant so much to all of them, but…

It wasn't his fault.

"I'd prefer to leave than cause distress," Wheeljack said slowly. He looked to Ratchet for help, but the medic said nothing, probably opting to see how it played out.

Kass clenched her fists briefly to brace herself further. "…It's okay," she said. She cleared her throat again and said louder, "It's not your fault."

He looked at her, at first surprised, and then with muted curiosity. He needed to hear that from one of the refugees, Kass knew, otherwise he'd probably go around thinking he was some sort of monster. She knew how her Wheeljack thought—always putting others above himself—so this one must be similar. In that way, she couldn't help but feel guilty about making him act so shyly around them.

Ratchet rumbled lowly, distracting Wheeljack with some unheard command. Both mechs turned back to one of the work tables against the wall. The silence was deafening, but Kass didn't mind. She took the time to look at the other mech closer, cataloguing just how different this mech was from the one she knew. He was a lighter shade of blue and had more decals. He was the same height though and the earfins were hauntingly familiar.

But he was still different. That… that would help. A lot.

"You're not Wheeljack," she said simply when he turned around. He stared at her, surprised; both ignored the warning glare Ratchet sent the other Autobot.

Wheeljack tilted his helm and his earfins dimmer even further. "I know," he replied, sounding guilty. "I already registered this alias, however, so I don't know if—"

All at once, Kass knew what to do.

"WJ," she said, surprising him again. "It's a nickname." Kass stood up straighter and cleared her throat before asking, "May I call you WJ instead?"

A name change was a small alteration, but with his paintjob and decals being so different… maybe it would be enough to make his presence bearable and the survivors' own presence not so distracting for the Autobots.

Ratchet stared between them, constantly seeking out any signs of distress from either party. Kass waited patiently as Wheeljack looked at her and she could practically hear his processor whirling as he went over what she had just told him.

"…an odd nickname," he said at length. Kass could hear a smile in his voice, however. "But if it pleases you, you may."

Kass nodded, smiling back. WJ would be enough. She was grateful he was going to oblige her request, because honestly, it made things easier even now to stare up at him. The tension in the room eased a bit, though she knew they had a long way to go before the heartache faded completely.
"I must say, your accent is very intriguing," WJ said suddenly. "You're from the British Isles, then?"

"My parents were from what was left of it," Kass said, not entirely comfortable with that line of conversation, but she sat down on the table and decided to endure it. "Though, yes, I am British."

WJ's earfins flashed brightly, the effect achingly familiar. "Fascinating! I suppose the same could be said of Bluestreak or Prowl's position as Praxian refugees, even though they were both raised there, albeit for a very short time period," he said. "The sociological attachment to state identities seems to transcend our species boundaries, regardless."

Kass stared at him and focused on looking at his differences. "...Yes," she said, polite. "I suppose so."

Ratchet made a sighing sound and none-too-gently pushed WJ toward the door, glaring. "Take your sociological ranting elsewhere, I need to work!" he snapped. He gestured at WJ, whom amicably chuckled and slipped outside. "Go harass Ironhide for once!" He turned to Kass with a slightly less lethal expression, though it was still enough to make Kass' heart jump a tiny bit. "And you. I expect full dedication to learning how to properly fix an injured mech. There are no short cuts in my 'bay, and you had better learn that this is my domain and you follow my instructions—understand?"

That was both more than she was hoping for and a little less than she feared. Kass smiled weakly and nodded.

"Perfectly."

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Tranquility, Nevada

When he walked back into his house for the first time in days, his father looked up from the couch and told him, "Welcome to the new world."

Sam couldn't really disagree with that statement. After everything that had happened and what was still happening all over the globe—it was a brand new planet, and he had to figure out his place upon it.

He had expected the panic, and boy, was there ever panic. He had numbly paraded through a bunch of social networking sites and had seen the hysterical comments, the staunch disbelief from those who called it a hoax, and the countless mentions of how scary the situation was. The religious community was throwing a royal tantrum, right- and left-winged conservative groups were denouncing the Autobots as terrorists, and apparently there was already a series of fake Transformers sightings over in Kansas. And then there was the conspiracy theorist community, which had nearly collapsed in euphoria.

Bumblebee had driven him and Mikaela home for the weekend. They were there to say goodbye to family and to pack for a far more permanent move than had originally been planned—at least in Sam's case. A lot of hard decisions had been made in the last week, and one of them inevitably came to rest solidly on his shoulders alone: school.

He'd walked in the door on Thursday night to find his parents talking about the news, his mother worrying loudly about whether Stanford would be a safe place for Sam to be in the midst of all of this. "I'm not going," he'd said, refusing to look either parent in the eye that night. He'd looked at the space between his mother and father and fought the urge to run away.

His father wasn't surprised at his decision, after all, he had already missed orientation and classes
would begin the next day. His mother plainly didn't know whether to be relieved or terrified that Sam would instead leave the safety of home to be with the Autobots.

"Okay," Ron Witwicky had said, nodding stiffly. The gesture was obviously difficult, since a range of emotions flashed over his face; Sam picked up on the disappointment and trembled.

Maybe—maybe he would have the chance to go again, someday, when things calmed down. But he couldn't do it now. The Autobots couldn't spare a mech to wait around on him and be his safety net, protecting him from the Decepticon threat. And he wouldn't go without backup, would never risk the lives of so many other, innocent people, just so that he could attend an Ivy League college. Not to mention that it didn't feel right to spend thousands of dollars of his parents' money when he had credible information that his college would be pretty much shut down within a couple of years. A literal war of the worlds was starting, and his parents would need that money to get by, to survive what was coming. People were going to start dying; Sam wasn't stupid. He would be lucky if he survived as it was.

So instead of college, Sam would have his dream come true: he would live on the NEST compound either until they won the war or until more mechs arrived and Bumblebee could reduce his duties to the Autobots and simply be Sam's bodyguard. At that point they could leave the NEST base, and just… go somewhere else. Not home though. Sam would still refuse to stay at home, out of fear that the Decepticons would attack his family. Mikaela had similar worries for her father. She would be working for Ratchet on on base, though, so she had a role to fill. Sam had fleetingly thought that maybe he could learn how to help Ratchet too. It would at least give him something to do. He wanted to find something—anything—to make this hiatus worthwhile.

On Sunday, Sam had pulled his last load of clean clothes out of the laundry and finished his packing, was glad that his mother had finally backed off asking him questions ("Where are you going? I know it's a secret, but I'm your mother!"). His father was avoiding him as well, though Sam knew it was just how he dealt with emotional issues. Mikaela had said goodbye to her dad and grandmother that morning. That evening they'd head out, just Sam, Mikaela and 'Bee… and from there, they'd handle it step by step.

Mikaela had come over and was lying on the futon on the porch as he watched TV on the small box they had taken from the kitchen. She was methodically scouring the Web for any new reports on the aliens or any new amateur sightings that might actually have credence. Sam watched blankly as CNN covered more of the situation in Washington, as feeble old men tried to make sense of this global upheaval.

"Director of National Intelligence, John Keller, held another press conference earlier this morning to detail the alien-human alliance that Congress has been deliberating over for the last twenty-four hours," the reporter on the screen said in front of a D.C. backdrop. Sam marveled at her ability to stay so calm while talking about the issue at hand. "The so-called Autobot Army has been under US military supervision for several months, and along with the US military have formed a coalition known as the Non-Biological Extraterrestrial Species Team, or NEST, to confront any return visits from the alien faction we have come to know as hostile to Earth…"

When he had asked what the new alliance was, Bumblebee had just shrugged and reassured him it was the same thing essentially, with far fewer restrictions as to their own appearance, and what had to happen if humans saw them in root mode. They still had to play it safe and try to remain out of the public eye, just so they didn't cause mass hysteria, but apparently this was just for show and to make the public feel better.

They weren't feeling better, though, Sam noted, as he flipped through multiple channels of news that
all had the same sentiments being thrown around: *who are these Autobots? What about those Decepticon things? Why are they still here if the evil aliens have been defeated? What do you mean, the bad aliens are still around? Are we at war? What does that mean?*

There had been new videos too, that the media was replaying over and over again. Three uniform, but unidentified F-22 Raptors had been spotted over Denmark two days ago and now that the world knew to that alien crafts could show up in a variety of different guises, they had smartly picked up on the clip as evidence of aliens elsewhere, beyond the States.

"Bee, I found another video," Mikaela called out, looking over Sam's shoulder toward the driveway.

There was a harsh sound of metal sliding over metal and Sam flinched. He looked over and saw Bumblebee crouching next to the porch—feet mindful of the walkway.

"You checked before doing that, right?" Sam asked, glancing around his empty, darkening backyard warily. It was nearly nine, but sometimes his neighbors liked to spy on people, just like his mother. The Autobots might have been exposed to the public (Prowl had looked positively unimpressed on TV during his brief stint over in Washington that morning as physical proof for the doubtful), but Main Street America would have a lot of difficulties accepting life with giant alien robots.

Bumblebee nodded and leaned closer to Mikaela. "What video?" he asked.

"There are a bunch of viral videos up on YouTube now," Mikaela said, clicking on multiple windows apparently as she skimmed. She bit her lip. "Just the same flier videos that we saw on CNN, but I think one was from a different angle."

"How's NEST holding up with this whole rogue video thing?" Sam asked, looking up at Bumblebee.

Now that the secret was out, people were actively looking for this kind of footage and posting it, and the government didn't have a hope of suppressing it. But Sam and Mikaela thought that maybe, through civilian sightings, they could finally find out where the hell Galvatron and his people were hiding. It had been unsettlingly quiet everywhere, and NEST was getting panicked over that. Or at least, the humans were. Sam had seen how collected Prowl and Ironhide were, so he had faith that the Autobots would keep their cool. They were in good hands.

The scout shook his head. "It's nothing we didn't expect, though the use of the amateur video might be helpful to locate Starscream or any other Decepticons," he said.

Mikaela made a tsking sound. "Did you guys see the one of the two mechs in Russia?" she asked.

"Yes, we got that this morning. Those hikers are lucky to have escaped," Bumblebee said, grim.

"And another thing just popped up in London," Mikaela continued, pointing at her screen. Sam leaned over and saw a grainy shot of a mech transforming and then re-transforming in what looked like a mall parking lot. "A security camera caught it."

Bumblebee rumbled lowly. "I hadn't seen it, but Ironhide just told me they received that as well," he said. He rested his arms on his knees as he peered at his two friends. "Thank you for investigating, both of you. If we miss anything ourselves, I'm sure one of you or the other humans will notice it on your media networks."

"Hopefully," Sam sighed, leaning upright a bit. His back hurt, as did his head, but they had a long car ride back to base in a few hours, so there wasn't much he could do about it.
The TV droned on and Mikaela returned to surfing for any signs of alien intrigued. Sam stared at the screen door for a long moment, trying not to think about how he wasn't going to be able to come home for a long time, if ever. There were worse things, though, Sam reminded himself.

After all, they had just had a funeral for the best secondary father figure he had ever had. Sam took several deep breaths and tried not to think about that either. He wasn't good at mental coaching, at all.

Untangling himself from Mikaela, Sam stood up. He wasn't going to be thinking about this now.

"I'm going to go take a shower," he announced, rubbing his face tiredly. They were leaving once his mother came back from the store, with snacks he told her they wouldn't need for the road. Mikaela made a sound of acknowledgement, not even looking up, and Bumblebee nodded.

"Perhaps you should take a nap," the Autobot said, looking at Sam, concerned.

Sam shook his head and stepped out onto the grass to pat Bumblebee's cheek. "Don't worry, I can always sleep on the way," he said, smirking. It would be a long drive, but there wasn't much anyone could do about that—

"Sam…?" he heard someone begin, before cutting themselves off with a sharp gasp.

Sam froze where he was and didn't turn around at first, because if his ears weren't playing tricks on him, and his mother's voice hadn't miraculously deepened within the last hour—

Oh no. Oh NO.

Slowly, with his heart pounding like a war drum, Sam turned. Parallel to him, Mikaela had turned a remarkable pale color and gazed out at the source of the voice with unadulterated horror from the futon.

Beyond Bumblebee's shoulders, Sam could easily see Miles Lancaster poised at the end of the driveway and staring directly at Bumblebee with a look that reminded Sam of a wild animal facing down a moving vehicle. 

OH SHIT.

"Uh oh," an unfamiliar radio voice from Bumblebee's speakers rang out, the Autobot scout practically wilting downward as he looked back at Miles.

"Miles!" Sam squeaked, blood running cold.

Miles stared at Sam with the same deer-in-headlights expression and then looked up—at Bumblebee. There was a long, excruciating pause. But Sam knew what was coming, even as a part of him died on the inside as Miles' face grew blotchier and his eyes grew even wider as his emotions finally spilled over.

"Sam, what the hell is this? !"

"Miles, wait—shit—WAIT!" Sam exclaimed at the same time as Mikaela leaped up from the futon, shouting, "Shut up! Shut up!"

With both Sam and Miles shrieking at the same time ("SAM, WHAT THE HELL—WHAT THE HELL? !" "MILES, SHUT UP! STOP SHOUTING!"), Bumblebee had quickly transformed back
into his automobile form when a dog started barking down the street. That, of course, made Miles scream even louder, pointing at the Autobot frantically.

"YOUR CAR IS A ROBOT!" he yelled, starting to jump back more; fear alone was probably the only thing that was keeping him from running down the back alley. "SAM!"

"No, Miles, wait, stop yelling!" Sam pleaded, trying to do the same himself. Mikaela was unhelpfully standing there, hand clasped to her mouth, looking utterly speechless. "Just—!"

"Oh, GOD, you were right! It's Satan's Camaro! I didn't LISTEN!" Miles kept yelling, clutching at his face. His hysteria was contagious, even if it was stemming from an entirely different reason. "Ohmygod, Sam, what is that thing? ! Is it an alien? ! It's an alien, isn't it? !"

"Miles, hold on," Mikaela began, voice wavering, breaking her reverie. She looked over at Bumblebee and then Sam with a fearful expression. "I-it's not—"

"Ohmygod, SAM, she knew about the robot before me? !" Miles suddenly demanded, looking at Mikaela accusingly. He sent Sam a scathing look. "Dude, so not cool!"

Sam slapped a hand over his face, exasperated. "Just calm down!" he snapped, physically feeling ill from this. Oh, God, he did NOT need this, not now—

"Calm down? ! You have a giant robot car monster in your driveway!" Miles screeched, pointing now at Bumblebee again. "It's one of the aliens, isn't it? !"

Strangling on air, Sam looked back at Bumblebee, who was also quiet, but judging how tense the car was, the Autobot was probably already radioing the situation into his superiors.

Well, there went his internship at NEST, Sam thought, dazed.

"We need to bring him in," Bumblebee announced, causing Miles to choke on whatever other heated comment he had been meaning to throw out. "NEST will need to debrief him."

"NEST, what the fuck is NEST? !" Miles gasped, obviously having not watched the news recently.

"It's nothing bad, I swear!" Sam cut in, trying to keep his friend calm. He stepped closer, hands out in a placating way. "Miles, I swear, I will tell you everything you want to know. You know how I was going out to California? This is why. It's huge, okay? Big military and government business, but it's all a secret."

Miles gaped at him. "I knew you were lying," he said, causing Sam to wince. "This whole time— you were with the aliens?"

"I'm sorry. Dude, I am so sorry," Sam replied, shaking his head. He nodded back at Bumblebee. "Miles, this is serious. I mean it. You can't just meet one of these dudes and not get debriefed. NEST needs to make sure you don't go blabbing important details, okay? They're the good guys though, I promise."

His words, intended to be comforting, probably didn't do much to soothe Miles' paranoid fear. The blond man kept staring at Bumblebee in open horror. Sam swallowed hard and tried to keep breathing normally. He looked back at Mikaela, who just looked at him helplessly, and he knew they had to at least keep this from going any further. Sam had never wanted this, but what was done was done.

"…Then…” Miles started, clearly struggling as he looked over at Sam, imploring for answers.
"Mission City…?"

As his father came out onto the porch to see what was causing all the ruckus, Sam laughed, hysteria and exhaustion hitting each other in his mind. "Miles," he began, shaking his head, "get in the car and I'll tell you everything about it."

This would be one hell of a long drive back.

End Chapter 24.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Jazz gets involved and then Barns discovers something particularly awful.

A/Ns:
- Yes, WJ is his official name now. He's the only one who gets a big name change, at least until much, much later in the story.
- I love Miles Lancaster and there's nothing you can do to stop me. (I swear, he has a point in all this.)
The first few days back on the job were always a trip, Jazz realized with mild humor. He hadn't been an officer in half a century, and hadn't been a true soldier in decades. It was a bit of a culture shock, and not just for him.

He still recharged with his team in Hangar B. Awkwardly so, since Rachel still wasn't speaking to him and the former 'Cons in the group were all put on edge by the fact that he'd become an Autobot again. Thundercracker held down the fort there most days; since he had finished uploading every bit of intel he could recall to the tactical database, he was only occasionally needed in person. Jazz generally left early in the morning and came back any time he had a break, to check in and reassure the other refugees that he was coming back. Seeing him frequently seemed to help ease the tension caused by the freshly painted Autobot sigil on his chestplates, something even Thundercracker avoided looking at directly.

Primarily, Jazz worked with Prowl and Bumblebee, organizing the database, developing queries and coordinating with Ironhide and his teams as they tried to put the data to use. Sideswipe, Sunstreaker, and Jolt were leading separate NEST teams as they scouted several locations in Canada and Alaska that Jazz and Thundercracker had identified as energon cache and forward recon base locations in their old world. They hadn't found anything yet, but they would be thorough, and Jazz thought they would find something eventually.

There were more pressing issues than just the Decepticons themselves, however. Jazz knew they were facing a very short time window now, with the Fallen already on Earth, and frankly, he was beginning to feel a little nervous.

"We need t' find th' drones," he said, catching Prowl's attention one day. Jazz nodded his helm toward the computer bank where the compiled data resided. "We haven't touched that side of th' data yet. We should."

"We have monitors in place with NASA and other international satellites to observe any approaching alien craft," Prowl replied, frowning. "We haven't detected anything at all concerning them."
Ironhide snorted, and to Jazz's surprise, took his side. "I agree with Jazz," he said. "We should begin to focus our attention on locations where they found the drones before."

"But there's nothing there," Prowl countered, shaking his helm. "We've already scouted those areas. There's nothing."

Jazz knew Prowl was telling the truth, but he also knew they couldn't just disregard the drones. Those were their main enemies, even more so than Galvatron or the Fallen. If the drones were allowed to take hold on Earth has they had before…

All their efforts would be wasted. They could not let that happen. Jazz refused to allow it.

At the door, a familiar human barged in, looking quite harassed as he walked. Jazz was surprised Lennox had been late to the meeting, mostly because he hadn't even noticed the human soldier had been missing.

"Where were you?" Jazz asked.

"Handling that damn Lancaster kid," Lennox said, irritably. He stopped short of Jazz's pedes and rubbed his face, exhausted. "God… I know it wasn't anyone's fault, but that was definitely not on the agenda."

Jazz had heard about the minor security breach and had to chuckle at Sam's luck. He'd never met the human in question and couldn't speak for his trustworthiness, but at least he'd first seen Bumblebee after the big alien reveal had occurred. In his opinion, they had more important things to worry about than a teenage boy who found out the Autobots existed in his own town.

Ironhide rumbled lowly. "Where is he now?"

"With Sam and Mikaela, asking a shit ton of questions. Bumblebee's still moderating, so I think we can push that issue aside for now." Lennox looked upward at Jazz and Prowl specifically. "Alright. What the hell is happening?"

They still suffered from a severe lack of intelligence concerning the enemies' actions, so they couldn't come up with exact plans yet, but Prowl was organizing their erratically changing group numbers into rapid-response teams that would eventually be located on different bases around the world—an action that Jazz said had helped to mitigate the influx of 'Cons in his world. They had established a base in Afghanistan and Keller was still politicking with the Germans, who refused to let them use Vilseck as a base, citing unknown dangers from the "aliens." Who would be going to each base would be dependent on how many more forward teams they would receive, and when.

"There is another team scheduled to arrive from Galaxus," Prowl told them. His strained expression spoke volumes on what the human politicians had had to say on the matter. "Mirage is leading the crew."

"How many?" Lennox asked, looking resigned to having to deal with the politics of receiving more mechs. Jazz had to chuckle.

"Just three," Prowl replied, shaking his helm. "Mirage, Trailbreaker, and Cliffjumper."

They could certainly use Trailbreaker and Cliffjumper on the battlefield; both of them were excellent frontline soldiers. But having Mirage around would definitely be a plus for Jazz's plans.

"Haven't seen 'Raj since Tyger Pax," Jazz commented, already anticipating a new wave of Special Ops missions on Earth. It would be fun; he had never had the chance to work his magic during his
version of the war on Earth, since they'd never been able to find Nemesis or any of their enemies' bases to truly wreak havoc within.

Ironhide rumbled. "Just what we need, more spies," he said, irritable. "At least Trailbreaker and Cliffjumper can help with the muscle."

"We need to distribute the amount of warriors and intel gathering mechs through the bases," Lennox said, specifically to Prowl. "Diego Garcia is the biggest of the international teams, but access to the Chinese mainland is still iffy right now. I think we should focus on moving some of the heavier hitters toward Kandahar…"

It was a mess, but getting better. Jazz knew the human governments wanted to keep all the Autobots in one or two easy-to-manage teams, both for political expediency and as a show of strength to the world at large. But he knew, from past experience on Earth and off, that until they had more intel on their enemies' movements, they had to expect an attack from anywhere. They had no idea where Galvatron would reappear, nor did they know how many troops he would have, or when or if he'd release the drones. Scattering small, rapid response teams across the globe would give them an advantage. Right now, he was grateful that they had a few more moments to catch their breath, to find a plan to prepare for the drones and Decepticons alike. Jazz knew this momentary peace wouldn't last for long.

They had to be ready.

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Considering the fact that data provided by Thundercracker and Jazz about an enemy storage cache had led them to the enemy once before, Prowl and Ironhide had decided they would continue along that path. Thundercracker had not been involved in organizing the actual mission—that had been done by the Autobots—but he had been the one to give them the intel on several sites in Canada and one in Alaska that had been overlooked by NEST in Jazz's time, like many others. So Thundercracker had been required to pick through every byte of data he had on that site and submit his own assessment of the location and its strategic advantage. He hadn't been surprised at how thoroughly Ironhide had scrutinized his report, but Thundercracker knew Jazz would convince the Autobots to check it out regardless.

What really concerned him was the fact that they had yet to start looking for the drones; apparently they weren't taking that threat seriously yet. Jazz swore it was just a matter of organizational mayhem, but Thundercracker still scowled openly at the Autobots in charge. They had to prioritize the drones over the Decepticons; they had failed to do that in their previous world and it had cost NEST tremendously.

"At least we know about them and what they can do," Lennox had reasoned. That would give them an advantage, certainly, but not much of one. Thundercracker just growled and stayed out of the debates; he let Jazz handle the issue.

For his part, he tried to stay back and watch the planning processes. With most of his information already catalogued, he could do nothing more than shift heavy objects when asked, or occasionally give short debriefings on drone combat behavior to the human military. They were more interested, of course, with how to fight Decepticons. He all too readily told them of weaknesses in their formations and strategies; there was no love lost between himself and that army, he admitted to himself.

As for fighting the drones… Thundercracker hoped their four humans might be better teachers and more interesting sources of knowledge for the human soldiers to learn from. Rachel was still sulking,
and Danny was probably not up to touching a weapon of any sort, but perhaps in time they'd all be willing to show NEST just how to bring down those metal monsters.

Thundercracker knew he'd have to wait to hear how the energon storage site mission had gone. The other Autobots, while not going out of their way to avoid talking with him, rarely sought him out unless they needed something. He doubted any of them would think to communicate the results of the mission directly. He expected to hear the news from Jazz, eventually. Jazz was still getting back into the swing of being a soldier, and was doing a decent job of balancing those responsibilities plus his obligations to their own ten, so Thundercracker could cut him some slack getting the information to him.

Today, for what felt like the first time in months, everyone else was out of the hangar helping around the base. So it was rather surprising to hear someone call his name as he stood outside their designated hangar, enjoying the sunshine and the momentary solitude. He hadn't realized one of the Autobots had walked up, preternaturally quiet, right behind him.

"Thundercracker?"

The jet froze—and then forced a wave of hot emotion back to his spark as he recognized the voice. "What?" he demanded, turning around. He glared without hesitation down at the smaller Autobot, who gazed up with just a faint glimmer of trepidation.

Prowl's doorwings were rigidly flared high up on his back as he stared up at the larger mech. The trepidation was gradually replaced with a calmness that Thundercracker wanted to smack off of his faceplates. Why the frag was this mech so fragging calm all the time?

"…Your files were helpful in compiling the coastal search outlines," Prowl stated after a moment. He inclined his helm at the Seeker, seemingly fearless. "We discovered an energon cache north of Anchorage."

Thundercracker had recalled how Starscream had begun to hoard energon cubes in various locations before Galvatron returned, in anticipation of an army Starscream would never get to run himself. "Great." Thundercracker paused, a stray thought striking him when he thought of Starscream. "Any mechs?"

Prowl frowned. "Just one, but Ironhide was forced to deactivate him when he went after civilian natives. It was a flier." Prowl stopped and seemed to withdraw a bit, though Thundercracker doubted it was because he noticed the jet's darkening mood. Prowl held his gaze firmly, but with a tinge of sympathy. "…I do not believe we have seen Skywarp in action, but if any sightings are held, I will notify you."

That—was by far not the first thing Thundercracker had expected to hear. At all.

"Wh-why?" he asked, too startled to think of how unguarded he sounded. He shouldn't react so openly to that kind of thing in front of this mech.

It didn't seem to matter, however. "Ah…" Prowl shifted awkwardly, or as awkwardly as an unexpressive mech like him could be. He dropped his gaze momentarily. "I just assumed you'd like to know."

He was talking about Skywarp. Why… why was Prowl talking to him about Skywarp? Part of Thundercracker wanted to lash out and blame Prowl for bringing up matters that had nothing to do with him. But the wiser, saner part of him thankfully held that anger back. It was senseless and
unimportant. He was better than that.

Besides… Thundercracker had read the report from the incident in Mexico. Prime had taken out a Seeker teleporter before his own demise. They hadn't been able to recover the remains (which had unhelpfully disappeared after Mexican forces took NEST in for questioning.) They had only recovered parts of Scorponok after the fact. There was no way to tell if the teleporter had been Skywarp.

It didn't matter, Thundercracker firmly told himself over and over, keeping himself rational. It wasn't his Skywarp. His Skywarp was dead. He had Jazz now, and Jazz had him. Period.

"Not really," he said at length, keeping his emotions in check. Just looking at the other mech was enough to make his spark race with negative emotions. "I… he's not my Skywarp. There's already another Thundercracker out there, so it's unimportant."

Prowl watched him carefully as he observed his reactions. "…True…" he said. He suddenly looked down at the datapad in his hands, abruptly and briskly getting back to business. It was an odd contrast to Jazz, who liked to drag awkward moments out. "Regardless, with this successful mission, we can continue to use your data more prominently. Director Keller is still wary of using any of your people's input, but my analysis indicates that rejecting it as valid data decreases our odds of success."

Prowl glanced up at the taller mech again. "Ratchet is busy providing some maintenance instructions to Mikaela Banes and Kassandra Hall today, but if you are interested, tonight he will reactivate your flight protocols."

He was getting his wings back? Oh, what a feeling. What a relief. Thundercracker fought the urge to grin, because that was definitely unbecoming in front of anyone, especially this mech.

"…That would be acceptable," Thundercracker said, struggling to control himself. "Thank you." He meant it.

"It's of no consequence," Prowl said, entirely neutral. His tone did seem a bit lighter, however. He had a better humor than Thundercracker did. "In addition, the rest of your team will be receiving their weapons back, including the humans. Wheel—I mean, WJ, has expressed interest in looking at the humans' weapons first though, just out of curiosity."

That was a lot going on in that statement. Thundercracker stopped again, stunned. "You're trusting all of us," he stated, not questioning, because he knew Prowl would never just say something and not mean it.

They would trust the survivors with weapons. That meant… well, it meant they could defend themselves now, should it be necessary. And it was an invitation for the mechs willing to help NEST to step up. Arcee would be fragging thrilled; Wildrider would be too, simply because he could have his weapons back. Rachel would also be excited to be armed again.

Prowl's doorwings twitched with an unrecognizable emotion. "I have no choice but to trust you. Besides…" He sighed and, if the lighting overhead wasn't distorting the gesture, he smiled. Just a little. "The Autobot ethos is grounded in the belief that no matter the deeds of the past, it is how we act now that truly defines us. Optimus believed that, and so shall I."

Thundercracker felt ill at ease at the mention of the fallen Autobot leader, as well as the Autobot sentimentalities. It just didn't fit with him. "…Right."

They had to take this as a good thing, however. They could defend themselves now and could even offer their services to their hosts in return for continued hospitality. They had worth now. It had been
a long time since Thundercracker had needed to deal with the politics of the military, but he knew having something to offer those above him was always a plus.

Prowl nodded his head politely and made to leave, having said his piece. Thundercracker watched him turn around, taking in every bit of his presumed rival. He wanted to hate how the mech was alive now, plus how he was still Jazz's superior and—though it was difficult to think of—his friend. It could have been so easy to hate Prowl for everything he had never done, regardless of fairness. Thundercracker didn't want to be fair. He wanted to blame the other mech to make himself feel safer, to feel better—

But he couldn't.

Thundercracker could see the weary twitches, the uncertain glances, and the apparently unnatural distance Prowl kept when dealing with Jazz or Thundercracker, alone or together. He was respecting their choice. He was leaving them alone, at least when it came to their… pasts. He was being the better person, Thundercracker realized… at least better than Thundercracker had been being for the last month and a half.

…He couldn't hate him for that.

"Prowl," he said, before the mech had walked too far away. Prowl froze, doorwings going high up on his back again, and Thundercracker regretted speaking up.

"Yes?" the Autobot tactician asked, turning slightly to look at Thundercracker, professional as always.

Thundercracker nodded his head slightly. "Thank you."

Prowl's doorwings went down a bit, the only sign his emotions had changed. "…You are welcome," he said without hesitation. He turned and continued on his way without a single sign that he didn't mean it.

After that, Thundercracker was determined to be a better mech as well.

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Work gloves: check. Welding mask: check. Ratty old jeans, t-shirt and one of Sam's old flannel-shirts: check. She looked like she had gotten dressed from materials swiped from her dad's closet, but Mikaela felt as ready as ever to face the day.

After… Mexico… it had been difficult to get moving again, but when Ratchet irritably summoned her back to studying mech biology and repairs, Mikaela found herself willing to head back to the med-bay for training. She needed the distraction, and ultimately, she knew she needed training if she was going to be able to help her friends in the future. It wasn't a matter of "if" she would be needed, after all; it was a sure thing.

She got the summons, as Sam ominously called it, shortly before nine in the morning, courtesy of Sideswipe yelling it into the barracks, unnecessarily loudly. It had scared Miles senseless, who had had to stay overnight due to Simmons' demand to have the chance to debrief him before he was released; the S-7 agent was temporarily back on Diego Garcia for now. So Sam had been demoted to babysitting his best friend and introducing him (slowly) to the aliens while Mikaela went to her own training with Ratchet.

When she walked into the med-bay, she was happy to see it wasn't entirely empty. Normally, being alone in the room was… uncomfortable. She remembered how they had dragged Hoist in after the
attack, practically torn in half. She remembered the smell of the oil and the strangely poignant smell of energon burning through the tile floor. She remembered being utterly helpless through it all, only barely keeping him alive before Wheel—WJ, she amended—had stepped in to help.

It wasn't Ratchet waiting for her, however. It was a tall, pale woman with short dark hair. Mikaela had to grin when she saw the other human, who was studying the rest of the med-bay intensely.

"Hello, Kass," she called out, only slightly startling the other woman. Mikaela held her hand out, smiling. "It's good to see you."

It was good to see one of the survivors up and about, under reasonable circumstances. They had holed up in their hangar after Optimus' death, but after Prowl had assigned them jobs around the base, they had slowly begun to interact more. The four humans were still rather wary of walking around without one of their own mechs, but Mikaela had been happy to learn Kass would also be working with Ratchet now. At least it meant that Mikaela would have someone other than a grouchy medic to talk with, too…

"Hi, Mikaela," Kass replied, accented voice as timid as always. She did smile back and shake Mikaela's hand with a moderately strong grip. "I'm sorry. I fear I'm invading your territory in all of this."

Mikaela frowned. "Huh? Oh, no, don't worry!" she exclaimed, understanding. She waved her hand. "Ratchet said you helped fix mechs way before I ever started learning. It's fine. In fact, I think it will be much easier to learn with someone. Certainly more entertaining." She grinned again, glancing back at the door where she heard the distinct sound of mech feet, raising her voice before adding, "Poor Hatchet will have two of us to deal with."

"I heard that!" Ratchet suddenly shouted outside the room. He came in with a look fit to kill, honing in on Mikaela with expert precision. "Where the frag did you—?"

"Sideswipe," Mikaela quipped, angelic. That was for the wake-up call. Kass chuckled next to her, but Ratchet just seethed at them, causing the British woman to stop and clear her throat.

"Remind me to deactivate him later. Get over here, both of you!" he said, engines snarling. Mikaela sighed and, carefully stepped into his hand to be lifted to the table. Kass was a bit more wary about jumping into the mech's other hand, but she quickly learned that Ratchet didn't like to be kept waiting. He let them step off onto the worktable, which was covered with spare metal parts. "Kassandra, I have no idea where your level of knowledge goes to, but I trust you know how to weld armor?"

"Yes, sir," Kass said, standing straight and proper. Mikaela just stood by with crossed arms, amused, used to the roughness.

"That's what Mikaela's been working on, so you can practice, too," the medic said, his scowl a bit less deadly than usual. He did like teaching new students, Mikaela had figured out; he just had to maintain his image. He pointed at what looked like two separate sets of mech armor. "I want to see straight, solid lines. If you mess up, you're doing it again, until you master it. Get to it."

With that, he left them with basic human-made welding tools and went to his own worktable, tinkering. Mikaela was sure he was keeping an eye on them the entire time, waiting either for a mistake or just the need to help them with something.

"Something tells me Sam got off easy on the job thing," Mikaela muttered, mostly to herself as she pulled her gloves on.
Kass chuckled softly. "At least we're going to be helpful," she said.

"True," Mikaela said, sighing. She paused after putting her mask on, not flipping it down. She glanced over at Kass. "So how much did you learn?"

That caused the British woman to stop and Mikaela almost retracted her question, knowing she was skating on thin ice. "With… Wheeljack?" Kass began, hesitant. She quickly recovered, however, and went through the process of pulling on her own new, NEST-issued work gloves. "Ah, not too much. Nothing complex, I mean. I just had to adapt how to fix cars to how to fix mech bodies."

"Yeah, that's where I started too. Still, you have more experience than me," Mikaela said, smirking. She was happy there was another medic-in-training. That meant they had more help when, not if, they needed medical assistance. That Kass knew more than Mikaela did was even better.

"Unfortunately," Kass muttered. She did turn and smile at Mikaela, surprising the teen. "You're a skilled mechanic as well, Ratchet said."

Mikaela shrugged. "My dad taught me." It had been kind of a necessity after awhile, to fix up her dad's legit customers' vehicles when her father was still hung over from the night before.

Kass hesitated again. "My mother taught me…” She suddenly smiled, staring at the mech armor absently. "She helped me to fix Bluestreak at our camp, when we first met him. She taught me not to be afraid of doing so. That helped me to be able to work on the others when there were problems."

They had all heard the stories about what had happened to the survivors, mostly second hand from Bumblebee, who had heard from Jazz. Whatever the four humans had told the psychologist was still off-limits, but… Mikaela could guess. She'd heard about the drones, about humanity being pushed to extinction, about the personal losses they had gone through. Kass had lost her whole family before meeting the other nine. Mikaela knew what it was like to grow up without parents, but this was so different. So, so different.

"…You're really brave, Kass. All of you are," she said, surprising herself and Kass, who looked up at her sharply. Mikaela forced herself to smile, fighting the sick feeling in her gut. "A lot stronger than me, or Sam."

She had learned what it was like to run for her life, or to fight for others, but never could she imagine what it was like to do that every day. Every damn day, for her entire life. She couldn't fathom how they had done it for twenty years. She couldn't even begin to comprehend it.

Kass stared at her blankly for a moment, clearly caught off guard. "…Thank you," she said. Kass smiled a little and nodded at Mikaela. "Jazz told me about how you saved Bumblebee's life. You're just as brave. We all have to be in a world like this."

"Yeah…” Mikaela smiled nervously and pulled down her welding mask to cover her discomfort. She looked at the armor, steeling herself. "Well, let's get to work."

The older woman smiled and flipped her own mask down. "Indeed."

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Sometimes, Barns was glad they had found themselves in this part of the twenty-first century.

It had been an ordinary afternoon, with most of the mechs busy doing odd jobs or speaking to the higher ups. The girls had disappeared into the washracks for a bit, after a discussion between Kass and Mikaela about societal norms resulted in Kass coming in with several specific female health
products ("What the fuck do you mean, shaved legs? Hair is supposed to be there!" "Actually, from the pictures we always saw, maybe we're not..." "Shut up, Danny.") Wildrider could call it cowardice, but Barns was certainly glad he was allowed to stay behind in the computer lab. Glorious technology. He was positively gleeful that Lennox had finally given him the go-ahead to use the computers. The lab was rarely used, apparently, and to a base filled with service men and women who used alien-upgraded computers, most of it was horribly outdated. To Barns, of course, it was all brand new and a constant learning experience. He reveled in the actual technology; it was so... so... smooth. So versatile. He had spent almost an hour at the controls, working his way through the basic commands, and marveled at it all.

"You pick this stuff up fast for someone who never had access to a computer before," Epps had commented the first time Barns sat down to the mouse and keyboard at one of the computers in the lab.

"I was raised in my teen years by giant alien robots," he joked, earning a few chuckles from the humans who had come to observe. "Of course I am."

So, whenever he wasn't needed to monitor Wildrider or Vortex alone in the company of an Autobot guard (not that they didn't trust their friends; it was just a matter of making sure things didn't get as explosive as they had before), Barns would slip away to the labs. He tried to get Danny interested in playing with the computers as well, but she didn't have the patience. Rachel had muttered about taking a shot at writing, but she wasn't exactly interested in writing anything new, Barns realized. Kass had given the computers a dirty look and probably wouldn't attempt anything for a while. That left Barns with plenty of time to do his own experimenting, albeit there wasn't much he could actually do.

In the meantime, however, Barns set to work doing what he had assumed Jazz would have already done, but he wanted to add his own input. They needed to prepare for the drones first and foremost. Barns couldn't be included in any of NEST's high level functions, obviously, but he could write a list of what he knew about the drones. He had begun to compile a list of their weaknesses, where they had found them, how humans could exploit them, details about the swarms they had encountered, and also what their chief targets were. It was all simple and probably already catalogued, but Barns needed to do something.

With Kass doing her medic thing, and all of the mechs pitching in periodically to help with odd jobs, Barns needed to be useful as well. He prayed he could use his knowledge for their benefit, somehow. For now, he was content to do his own typing.

Today, with the girls occupied and the mechs helping to clear the West tarmac, he'd looked forward to a couple of hours of his own work, and then he would spend some time doing an online course in Astronomy. But about half an hour after he got settled down to work, Robert Epps appeared at the door, knocking briefly to get Barns' attention.

"Hey, I've got some of your stuff," the lieutenant said in greeting.

"Quoi?" Barns asked, confused. He then saw the two large plastic bags Epps was carrying. He could see Kass's art book sticking out from it; the confiscated things NEST had taken after they realized they had radioactive dust on them. "Oh! Our belongings. They are clean?"

"Yeah, they've been for a bit. I just forgot to bring them over," Epps said, grinning sheepishly. He gently heaved the two bags onto the table. Barns felt eager to sort through it all. "Not much could be salvaged though. Sorry. We couldn't take chances with a lot of it, especially the fabric stuff. And most of the books were deteriorating, so we had to chuck them."
The books they could always replace. Barns stood up, eyeing the two bags, feeling a little overwhelmed. He didn't know where to start. Epps helped him pull the contents out, though Barns knew a lot of their possessions were missing. It was upsetting, but it could be worse.

He found his compass immediately and couldn't help but smile. It was still broken and rusty, but it was as he left it. He set it aside and went through Kass's art book briefly. It seemed okay, though a lot of the charcoal work was badly smeared. Hopefully she would be able to salvage it. Rachel's notebook was there and Danny's mp3 player was still intact. Epps looked at that specifically, bemused, but didn't ask questions.

What wasn't there was his Bible. Barns swallowed back a wave of bitterness when he realized it wasn't with everything else. It had been ratty and old, but still… it had held so many memories for him. That negative emotion was swiftly replaced with utter relief, however, when he found something that couldn't be replaced, tucked inside one of the salvaged books.

"Oh, thank goodness," Barns exclaimed, picking it up. "Our photograph survived."

"Photograph?" Epps repeated, surprised, looking closer.

Barns held the tiny square in front of him, elated that the fragile photograph had survived. It was still burnt and dirty, but it was theirs. He could see through the crease in the center all of their faces. All of them. His fingers trailed along the image, along the faces he cared so much about.

"Yes. Cameras were a rare commodity for us. This was recent. Only nine months ago, maybe." Barns paused and then held the photo out to Epps, keeping his finger on the top left corner, on one specific tall mech smiling back at them. "This is Wheeljack."

"Wow…" Epps stared at the image, eyebrows going up. "You guys fit?"

Barns laughed and took the photo back. "Sort of," he said, chuckling. He smiled at the image, glad to have it back. He looked back up at the soldier and nodded. "Thank you." He picked up the heaviest item, the datapad he had brought with him from the lab when they had made the leap through time.

"You should get this to Commander Prowl so he can look at whatever data might still be on this, if it still works."

Epps took the datapad awkwardly, clearly not used to handling mech technology. "Sounds good," he said, nodding.

Turning to the bags, Barns wondered if he should have waited for the girls to come back. They would be so happy to have at least a few of their possessions back—

But then, he noticed something odd and out of place. At the bottom of the plastic bag was a silver disk, approximately the size of his palm. Barns blinked, at first confused, but he then recognized what it was.

"Oh! Wait, Lieutenant!" he called, holding the object up.

Epps stopped at the door, looking back at the other man. "What's up?"

Barns held out the small silver disk out, frowning. "This, this is not mine." It was definitely transformer technology, but nothing he had brought with him.

"Uh, what is it?" Epps asked, walking over a little to peer quizzically at the object.

"I believe it is a data disk the mechs use," Barns explained, remembering seeing a lot of them around
the lab before Wheeljack cleared a lot of the clutter out. Barns had never used one, or even really knew how it worked. "It must be the Autobots'."

Surprisingly, Epps shook his head. "That's impossible. All that stuff was kept in seclusion. It came from your bag. See, it has a little sticky note saying where it came from specifically."

"...That's..." Barns stared at the disk, bewildered. "If it is not mine, why on Earth is it in my bag?"

He couldn't think of a reason to have it at all. He had only brought from the lab, by accident, the datapad and his handwritten notes. All the other tech had gone with the other mechs, like the energon converter with Vortex and the weapons dispersed among the humans and Thundercracker.

But there was no way this was from the Autobots' belongings, since none of them would have access to his bag, let alone willingly put something like a data disk in it. It made no—

And then.

And then... he realized.

"...Oh..." he began, voice failing. Barns gazed down at the silver disc as he felt the Earth give way beneath him. "Oh, Dieu."

No.

No.

Oh, God, no—

"Barnaby, your bag," Wheeljack said as he walked back into the main cavern. He bent down to give the young man the black bag. "You should each carry your own things on the off chance anyone is separated from the group."

Barns stood up, swaying so horribly Epps reached out to steady him. Barns could only stare in horror as he realized why the disk was in his bag.

Wheeljack.

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End Chapter 25.

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Chapter End Notes

The contents are revealed. Protip: It's not a nice disk.

A/Ns:
- Thundercracker what are you doing
- As my beta aptly put, "Mikaela needs some smart girlfriends!" Kass and her are gonna
be medic bros.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Barns' discovery brings up a devastating truth and old wounds are torn open. But then
Kass makes a new friend. Prepare for another really sad chapter, guys. ): Many thanks
to my beta, Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion,
religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this
story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"ARCEE!"

The pink femme physically flinched when she heard the frantic cry of her name. She dropped the
crate of wires she had been carrying for the engineers working on the reconstruction project at the
front of Hangar B. Barnaby had yelled her name and there wasn't a force on Earth that could have
stopped her—or Vortex beside her—from and charging back into the hangar to find the distressed
human.

"VORTEX! BLUESTREAK!" Barns continued to yell, his voice sounding desperate. Arcee's spark
tightened with terror as she stopped inside the hangar to look for the man. Vortex moved forward
when she paused, and she automatically
for her smaller stature the crates obscured his
location, but Vortex had no such handicap. She finally spotted him by the wall of offices, stumbling
out of the computer lab, cradling something in his hands. "Someone, venez ici!"

"Barns!" she exclaimed, rushing over. Arcee noticed Bluestreak and Wildrider at the door, the look
on Bluestreak's face showing his agitation. They must have heard his yelling, too,
"What's wrong?"

Barns stopped in front of the two transformers, staggering against a crate for support. Arcee could
see Lieutenant Epps at the computer lab door, looking utterly baffled. "It... wasn't an accident,"
Barns gasped, shaking so much, he nearly dropped the object in his hands. It was a small, silver disk.

"What?" Vortex demanded, startled. "What wasn't a mistake?"

"Wheeljack… Wheeljack…" Barns was fighting back tears as he spoke, piercing Arcee's spark with
his desperation. "He did it on purpose."

Everyone stopped. Arcee heard the sound of another human breathing behind her, but she kept her
focus on Barns. Something told her this was bad. Very, very bad. "Did what?" she asked, shaken.

Barns gripped his face, anguished, as he let her take the disk from him. "Stay… behind. He knew…
he knew…" he gasped. He closed his eyes and his voice grew hoarse. "Oh, God…!"

Beside her, Arcee could no longer ignore Danny, who had rushed over from their camp, fresh from
her shower. She was staring intently at Barns, her eyes full of an unrecognizable emotion. Arcee immediately wanted to drop the conversation. This was—this was not good—

"What do you mean?" Danny asked, in an even voice. The only thing that gave her away was a tiny tremor. Farther away, Wildrider let out a horrendous whine.

"He left a note. He—he left a note," Barns replied, too emotional to see the danger of telling them all like this. He gestured up at the data disk, which suddenly felt immensely heavy in Arcee's grasp. "That's wh-what this has to be. I can't open it on a human computer, but… I-I cannot watch it alone. Oh, God… I think… I think he did it on purpose."

Arcee glanced at Vortex, who seemed flustered, and none of them could think of anything to say. Arcee then saw Kass and Rachel standing just outside the door to the showers, obviously having heard it all.

"You mean… he… sent us here on purpose?" Kass said, horrified. Rachel stared at Barns silently, looking paler than Arcee had ever seen the girl look before.

Barns shook his head; he was fighting back his emotions as best he could, but Arcee could hear the tremor in his voice, "He left it in my bag. Please… I… I can't watch this alone…"

Why would he want to watch it? Arcee thought, horrified. She didn't want to. She couldn't. She—what would Wheeljack have said? He couldn't have known the drones would attack, so… so how would he have done this…?

Unless staying behind was the point.

Arcee stared at Barns, unable to speak. She couldn't… she just…

Danny suddenly stepped forward, as Barns spoke with Epps about using one of their computers to read the disk. Arcee stared at the brown haired woman, fear of a different sort flooding her processors.

"Danny, do you think you should—?" she began, hesitant. Since when had her voice sounded so faint?

"I need to see this," Danny said quietly, disregarding her concern. She didn't look at any of them, not even Wildrider, who was still whining and glancing at the disk as if it were a drone itself.

Regardless of what they did, they had to get the others. They couldn't open it, watch the contents without everyone there. Arcee braced her spark and tried to be strong.

::Jazz, we have a situation,:: she said over the comm. She shuttered her optics. ::Ask Prowl if we can use the communications center.::

It didn't take long to assemble over in Hangar C. Arcee refused to speak after Jazz said it was clear for them to use the computers. She thought about viewing the disk herself, alone, but her systems nearly stalled at the mere notion of having to listen to or watch whatever it was without the others there, too.

It was too fragging much.

"What is it?" Lennox asked immediately when the ten of them crowded the communications center.

Bumblebee respectfully stepped out, but even then, only Jazz, Arcee, Thundercracker and Wildrider
could squeeze inside, Vortex and Bluestreak standing in the doorframe; Prowl stood just behind them. The humans took most of the floor. Arcee gave the disk to Jazz, who held it in front of him with open trepidation.

"Barns found this, it … it has to be from our Wheeljack," Kass said, already flustered and red-eyed. "Please… can we watch it here?"

Lennox glanced over at Jazz, and then looked out the door to Prowl—and then looked back at Kass. "…All right," he said at length. He stopped and gave Jazz a sharp look. Arcee saw how he also glanced just briefly toward the humans. "Should you watch it first?" he asked Jazz.

"No," Danny said, startling them. She started to breathe quicker and pointed at the disk, adamant. "We're watching it. Together. Right now."

"Danny," Jazz began, wary. The human cut him off, however. "Now!" she yelled, glaring at him, daring him to disagree. Jazz looked up at Arcee and the other mechs, helpless.

They couldn't deny her this choice. All of them deserved to hear it, even if it tore their hearts and sparks out alike. Arcee wanted to grab both Barns and Danny in an embrace, to shield them from whatever the message was—but she stayed in the far corner to watch. She waited in terrified silence.

Jazz connected the disk to an adaptor one of the Autobots must have constructed in order for the human computer system to read their alien tech. Barns stood in the center of the room with the girls and just stared upwards at the largest monitor, leg bouncing up and down nervously. Arcee knew she probably should be sitting, but her wheel wouldn't move. She couldn't have moved away if she tried. The monitor flashed black for several seconds and then…

"Hello, my friends."

Arcee felt everyone tense inside and outside the room, as Wheeljack appeared on the screen. It was their Wheeljack—their friend and benefactor. He was in the lab in the cave, probably just hours before their fateful trip.

He smiled at them without his mask. Danny immediately started to cry and Arcee felt herself begin to tremble.

"If you are hearing this, I have either failed in letting you escape, or succeeded," Wheeljack continued. He sounded so light-hearted, and yet, Arcee could easily see the tension in his optics. He knew. "If you are hearing this in safety, I have succeeded, and I am most glad. If not… I am sorry. I have failed."

Wildrider whined and crept up from behind the motionless Thundercracker, settling right behind Danny. He gazed up at the screen with a tormented expression. Danny was crying quietly. Barns let his face fall into his open hands, and Rachel and Kass were holding hands tightly. Bluestreak also whined, but thankfully didn't speak; Arcee didn't miss how Vortex grasped the gunner's shoulder firmly, both in restraint and in support.

All around them, the voice of their missing friend flowed freely, piercing their hearts. "Yes… this is intentional," Wheeljack continued with a soft voice. "I know the risks of the machine—for it to work the way I intend it to work, the way I pray it has worked for you, then it needs an operator. I haven't told any of you for the simple reason that I know you. Every one of you would have volunteered to stay behind, and eventually none would have made the trip. We would have all perished here."
Wheeljack paused for a moment. "It seems almost illogical, that a situation we have all lived with for so long, that we have all accepted, would suddenly become intolerable to me. But when I realized what the machine was capable of, I decided that I could not allow all of us to die, not when there was a chance of escape. And so I could not tell you, could not give you the opportunity to interfere. I am sorry for the pain I may have caused with this treachery… but do know one thing. I love you. You are my friends, my family… I will never forget you, even if I fall after this. Do not think I carry on alone. I will bear in my spark the memories we have created with one another… and I will never forget you. That is enough for me."

Arcee heard Kass gasp and gulp back tears, and the femme could sympathize. She could barely keep upright as it was, keep her optics on the screen.

"You must have so many questions. I cannot answer all of them, except what I know now," Wheeljack said. He smiled and even chuckled a little. "Perceptor left notes about their plan to go back and fix the problems we caused for Earth. They couldn't save our people, or Cybertron, but they could save Earth." The mech hesitated on the screen. "I won't explain the details of what those eight mechs actually have tried to do, because I do not wish to frighten you. It is all risk. All just chance. But the theory is sound, and I am willing to take the chance that my friend's plan will work—that the same plan can save you. I am sorry it came to this. I am not sorry, though, if it has worked."

What had he done? What had the scientists done? Arcee wanted to scream those questions at the screen, at all the loose wires that dangled over her spark and mind so callously.

There was no point in yelling, though; there would never be answers now.

"Danielle… my daughter. I love you. I hope you have it in your heart to forgive me… what am I saying?" Wheeljack interrupted himself. He leaned closer, smiling as brightly as his earfins. "I have never met a kinder soul in the great expanse of the universe that I have been forced to travel. My time on Earth has been defined by my time with you. You are my greatest joy." Danny stared up at her father, frozen in grief. "I will miss you with all my being and I… I am sorry. For not telling you. But I… I want to see you survive. I need to know that you are safe. If I fail and you cannot hear this message… my spark will reach for you. If the machine leads you to your death, we will be together soon, I know. And if you are alive and hearing this in safety, I have one selfish request to ask of you, Danielle: do not give up. Do not stop here because of me. You must live. That is why I am doing this. For you, for our friends… our family." Wheeljack's smile became gentle. "Live on, dear child. You must live on."

Danny sobbed, shaking her head slowly.

"From the moment I first saw you in your mother's arms, I knew it was my job to see you to safety. To make sure you survived against all the terrible odds your world had given you. The pain that you have endured—all of you—was such an unjust thing for the universe to impose on us… but as long as we have each other, as long as we keep striving to live… the pain does not hurt as badly.

"Jazz, Thundercracker, Rachel, Arcee, Barnaby, Kassandra, Bluestreak, Vortex… Wildrider…" Wheeljack began, choking up finally over the names, especially the last. "My friends. My beloved friends. Keep each other until the end. At the end of our lives, whenever they are, we will all meet again. We will always have each other. Remember this. Remember it always."

Leaning closer than ever, the last thing of Wheeljack that any of them ever saw was him tilting his helm, wearing a quiet, loving smile.

"Good luck. Go together… be safe."
And with that, the video stopped and the screen went blank.

The sounds of grief were all that were left to hear.

Danny bit out a harsh sob. "Oh, God," she cried, her voice hoarse. Barns turned and hugged her fiercely, tears running down his face. They clung to each other, hanging on for dear life.

Arcee stared at the black screen, her spark almost not registering at all now. She just… stood there. It was all she had the strength to do.

*Oh, Primus.*

Wildrider shattered the remaining silence with a horrible wail, one that was followed by Bluestreak's own mournful cry. That was enough to shatter the weak calm they had forced themselves into. Arcee leaned back against the wall, unable to stand on her own anymore, not when she watched her human friends collapse in misery. Jazz turned to Thundercracker, both silently holding each other, but the others' keening made up for their quiet grief. Only Kass managed to stumble out of the room to collect herself elsewhere, moving past Vortex who was staring at the screen, still speechless.

Arcee's audio receptors burned with every spark-breaking, *"Why?"* that came from Wildrider and the spark-wrenching sorrow coming from Danny.

Why… indeed.

Hands covering her faceplates, Arcee grieved.

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Kass had no idea where the hell she was, and frankly, she didn't *care.*

She couldn't think, she couldn't *breathe,* and when she finally stopped her frantic dash from the communications center she felt like she would collapse. She hadn't seen anyone try to stop her, not that she would or could have stopped, and when she finally looked up through her tears, she saw that she was alone in another section of the hangar. It was so quiet. She was glad; she had left her friends because if she had to listen to their reactions any longer, she wasn't sure if she would be able to stand it.

This… this would take a long time to recover from. Kass stumbled along the hallway, hoping to find the exit soon. She could hear the echoing cries of the mechs and Danny reverberating through her ears. She could hear Wheeljack—the last thing she would ever hear him say, the only thing they had left of him and it was a *goodbye note.* The bastard—that bastard—had planned this. Maybe not the drones, or the spontaneous deposit on NEST soil—

But he had planned to send them to this past, this time—why? To restart? To recover? To try to rebuild? He sent them right back to a time and place where he already existed. He must have known, must have guessed, they would run into some of their doubles, at least. He knew that he, at least, would arrive on Earth eventually. He would have had to guess during those two months of planning and preparation, what awaited them here.

*He put them here, in this place and this time.* He left them to deal with this, alone. Kass stopped and leaned against the wall, sobbing. He left them. *He left them on purpose.*

It took everything she had in her to stop crying. She couldn't just stand around the base, no matter how empty it seemed, crying her eyes out. Kass kept her hands pressed to her face until the tears stopped. She had to be strong, for Danny, for Bluestreak, for Wildrider… she couldn't just break
It was done. Over. Wheeljack was dead and there wasn't anything she could do now. Kass took a deep breath and stared up at the ceiling, trembling still. Just like Kevin and her parents... he was gone. And those remaining were not.

She found a water fountain and washed her face until her skin stung, the cold water shocking her senses back. Kass wiped her face clean with her sleeves. She had to get it together. She was in the middle of an unknown base surrounded by unknown people—it would not do to be caught so unhinged.

Walking down the hallway, she recognized it as the place she had gone for her meeting with the psychologist. There were plenty of offices in this corridor, but no people. Kass wondered if she was even allowed to be here. She didn't care, however, so she kept walking. She kept walking even when she did finally see someone sitting on a metal bench outside one of the offices. The hallway was typical of most institutions – sparse and rather lonesome looking, so when she walked up, she wasn't surprised to see the young man on the bench turn to her with hopefulness in his expression.

"Oh, thank God," he exclaimed, obviously ignoring how disheveled she must look. "Someone other than giant metal things. Jeez, Sam left me here for an hour already and told me to wait until that Lenny guy came back—whoa." The blond haired teenager stared at her with a more concentrated look. "Uh, I guess you don't work here, huh?"

Kass said nothing, but she did sit down on the bench. She wanted to see Dr. Doherty again, if anyone, but she had no idea if he was even on the base anymore. She stared at the wall in front of her and wondered exactly what she was going to do next.

However, before she could contemplate knocking on the psychologist's door or going to find another NEST official to ask, she felt someone staring at her. Intensely. Kass froze and then glanced to the side.

The man was still sitting on the bench and Kass took the time to actually notice what he looked like. Blond hair, blue eyes, and an average combination of t-shirt and jeans—he looked every bit like a normal American... a civilian. That was odd. Why was he there?

"Who are you?" he said, his eyes bright and full of interest, clearly pleased that she was paying attention to him.

Kass stared back, knowing she didn't have a shred of that enthusiasm showing in her face. "Kass," she replied. Her voice sounded hollow to her ears. "Kassandra Hall."

For a moment, she thought she had scared him by being so somber. He stared at her in awe, at first speechless. As it turned out, however, he wasn't scared off.

"You're British. Awesome!" he exclaimed, startling her. He grinned and offered his hand, excited for reasons she couldn't fathom. "My name's Miles Lancaster."

Kass stared at the teen. She didn't offer her hand back, simply because she didn't have the strength to lift her arm. "Hi."

Miles was only a bit deterred by her lack of proper greeting. He dropped his hand and looked to the side. He was an awkward person overall, Kass thought. Terribly out of place for being on base, she also noticed.
"So, uh, you work with the aliens?" Miles suddenly asked, startling her.

"…No," Kass replied, blinking. The way he said that insinuated that he definitely wasn't a soldier; he was new to the base. If he wasn't with NEST, then…?

"Why're you here? You're not a soldier, are you?" Miles asked, interrupting her thoughts. He stopped and gave her a quizzical look. "Oh, wait, are you like Sam? You know, you bought a car, turned into a robot?"

Kass learned quite a bit from that line of rambling: first, he was a civilian. Second, he knew Sam Witwicky, perhaps as a peer or friend. Third, he was very much not supposed to be there, which meant he probably had been brought in because he saw something he shouldn't have.

Kass did her best not to lash out, his words unintentionally irritating.

"They're not robots, they're mechs," Kass snapped. "Robots are mindless drones. Mechs are sentient beings."

She regretted being so harsh, because Miles winced. "Oh, right. Sorry." He shifted uneasily in his seat, but surprisingly got over her reaction quickly. He glanced at her, curious yet again. "Uh, what're you doing here then?"

"…I'm friends. With them. Some of them," she said instead. She closed her eyes and rubbed them, exhausted. "Heh… I don't even know."

Miles frowned and seemed to pick up on her reluctance to speak. "Oh…"

She hoped he would go away. She just wanted silence.

But sitting there, she could hear him breathing, she could hear herself breathing, and all she wanted was to end the silence. It was creeping up out of the corners of her mind and threatening to choke her, or worse, drag more emotions out of her that she didn't have the energy left to sort out.

Taking a deep breath, Kass turned and faced her companion, who looked back at her, surprised.

"Why are you here, Miles?" she asked, voice hoarse, hoping he'd keep talking.

Instantly, it was like speaking with Bluestreak, who just needed a cue to continue on with his rambling. "Because I saw Sam's robo—I mean, mech. Uhh, Bumblebot? Bee? I don't remember," Miles explained all too readily. "Anyway, I saw him at Sam's house and now they're all up in arms about that, which wasn't my fault. If they're supposed to be in hiding, you'd think he'd do a better job of keeping a low profile, not just stand in the middle of the back yard." Miles sounded mildly disgruntled at that. "But anyhow, I saw him, so Sam and Mikaela put me into the car… er mech thing and brought me here. I've been stuck here for a couple of days now." He shrugged and swung his legs energetically back and forth as he sent her a knowing look. "Sam claims they aren't going to kill me, but you know what they do with civilians who see too much."

He stared at her, expecting her to understand. Kass stared back, at first still caught up in her own emotions that rendered her speechless, but looking into his bright, innocent blue eyes made her think. It made her think of how much she didn't know—about him, about herself—about this world.

"I don't know," she said. She looked right at him, and suddenly… something snapped. "I don't know
anything about this world, Miles."

She stood up swiftly and continued to hold eye contact with the other human, even as her heart started to race. "I'm from the year 2053. I lived through the apocalypse in Europe with eleven Autobots, Decepticons and humans. My mother and father were torn apart by drones and my—my little brother was blown to smithereens by dynamite." Miles just gawked at her, but Kass didn't care. She stood back, breathing heavily. "I—I know nothing of your world, or what this group will do with you, or me, because—"

Kass stopped, not because Miles was staring at her as if she had suddenly grown two heads, but because for the life of her, she couldn't think of how to finish that rant. She… had nothing. No answers. No hope. No…

"…I have no idea. I don't," she said, feeling completely disconnected from everything. Her eyes must have been frightening, but she didn't care. Kass finally looked away from Miles, gazing at the wall in muted horror. "Oh, God."

It was as if a bottomless pit had opened before her and she was sinking slowly down into it. Everything… it was all just closing in on her. The drones, the war, Wheeljack, her own unknown fate, this entire world that made no sense—it was just too much.

She had to stop this, before she broke down again. She was sick of crying. She had nowhere to go, however, not even as she looked around the hallway, as if she could find an answer somewhere in its lonely emptiness. She couldn't go back to the others yet. They'd still be panicking. She was panicking just thinking of them like that. Where?

She had nowhere to go.

"Hey… hey, I'm sorry," Miles suddenly said, standing up slowly. He was looking at her, incredibly concerned, holding a wary hand out halfway toward her, as if she was about to keel over. "Oh, Jesus, sorry. Are you okay? D-do you want me to, uh, go get someone?"

Kass took a deep breath and ran a hand over her face. How bad did she look? Just great, she thought in a lofty sense of self-consciousness. She wiped her eyes and took several more breaths, trying to calm down.

"No. No, I'm… I'm sorry," she said, haltingly. She shook her head and looked upwards. She should have just left. A psychologist couldn't help her. "I just… it's too much. It's just too much."

He didn't have a clue as to what she really meant, but Kass wasn't about to explain. She sat back down on the bench and stared at the opposite wall, utterly drained. Miles remained standing for a moment, probably watching to see if she had another panic attack. Kass fought the urge to blush; how embarrassing.

"…I really don't know what's going on either, Kass. I just got here and I'm already about to go crazy," Miles said slowly, as he sat down again as well. He frowned, however, in another curious manner, catching her attention. "…You said you're from the future?"

How, out of all of her rambling, this boy had singled that fact out, Kass had no idea. It was almost impressive. She stared at Miles for a moment, seeing how serious he was.

"…Yes," she said at length. If he already knew about the aliens, then she really didn't see why she had to keep anything else a secret. She didn't really care, either way.

Miles suddenly grinned, the gesture sincere and huge. "That's awesome," he exclaimed.
Kass blinked, unenthused. "Not really. No."

"Well, I mean, just the concept," Miles quickly amended. He skirted almost expertly over the awkward, tense parts of that area of discussion, going straight back into friendly mode. "I'm from Nevada. Me and Sam grew up together. We used to be BFFs, but I guess the car-robot thing is now. It sucks." Miles made a face. "I gotta admit, a giant alien car is better than me."

"Sam is a good man," Kass replied, exhaustion creeping up on her again, though it was simply from her hysterics rather than depression. "I'm sure he's just busy."

"Well, I get that now," Miles lamented, slamming into the wall behind them with dramatic flair. He covered his face with his arm and sighed overly loud. "What a mess."


"Are you the only time traveler?" Miles suddenly asked, causing her heart to jump a little from all sorts of emotion. He was looking at her with the same honest, puppy-dog looking eyes as before, though. He wasn't trying to be insensitive.

Reluctantly, Kass shook her head. "No. There are others."

"Cool," Miles said, though he immediately stopped and looked irritated. "Wait. Shit. This is nuts. Aliens and time travelers. I feel like von Däniken just invaded my life."

"...Who?" Kass finally asked at length, baffled by the oddly foreign name. What on Earth did Miles mean by any of that?

Well, the look of shock and disdain that Miles sent her was startling enough that Kass almost thought she had made a severe faux pas.

"Who's von Däniken? Whoa! You need to be educated, lady!" Miles exclaimed, partially horrified and partially excited. He turned in his seat, tucking his legs beneath him, and looked at Kass expectantly. "Alright, you know about the Nazca lines, right?"

The dark haired woman stared at him uncomprehendingly. Miles took the time to look aghast and shook his head, as if sympathetic.

"Alright, basically, there are these huge dirt lines in Peru that they found that make out these huge shapes and stuff. There's even a giant monkey," Miles began, practically radiating excitement now that he could explain whatever it was he found important. He spoke loudly and briskly. "Guys like von Däniken—he's an alien theorist—made the case these were made for aliens visiting our ancestors..."

He kept talking and talking, long after Kass stopped feeling the urge to cry. She sat there and listened as he ranted about so many inane, unimportant things. The hallway was no longer deathly still; it felt alive and the exuberant human before her kept the darkness at bay, his rambling a comfort she had never expected.

Kass didn't notice she had started to smile until Miles started to rant about the Egyptian Sphinx. Her heart was still broken and her eyes were still sore, but...

It felt good to smile.
Chapter End Notes

Jazz points Keller in the direction of some old friends and then Vortex and Arcee have a tiff.

A/Ns:
- Yes, Wheeljack knew who the two scientists were. No, he doesn't say it here. Why? Because like he said, he didn't want to scare his friends. ;)
- Aw, yeah, Miles has some smooth moves for the ladies.
- Erich von Däniken is the author of "Chariots of the Gods," which raises some questions over the possibility aliens visited in ancient times. The Nazca Lines "are a series of ancient geoglyphs located in the Nazca Desert in southern Peru" according to Wikipedia. Some ancient astronaut theorists, like von Däniken, suggest the lines were made to communicate with aliens above. …Miles is totally an alien conspiracist, guys. Duh.
- If you're wondering when Wheeljack made this good-bye note, check back to chapter one, section two. :)

End Chapter 26.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

The hunt for the drones gets started (sort of), Sam realizes he should learn to pack his own belongings, and Arcee and Vortex have a tiff.

In true *Fallout* tradition, I present to you twenty pages of exposition. Enjoy your cargo-hauling adventure and teenage angst intrigue! Many thanks again to my beta, Shantastic, for all of her hard work!

**Warnings**: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

**Disclaimer**: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*The Pentagon*

*Washington, DC*

*Two Weeks Later*

Well, that didn't last long, Keller mused. Not that he'd expected anything different, of course, but even though they had all been expecting it, the shock was still a shock.

He had been hoping, naively of course, that Galvatron and his cohorts would stay dormant, or at least appear that way for just a little longer. Politically speaking, Earth was still reeling on its axis and Keller had yet to stop receiving panicked and accusing messages from countries, corporations and wealthy individuals across the globe demanding access to information and the chance to profit off the presence of the Autobots. Some of them demanding the presence of the Autobots, and others demanding that they be forced off the planet ASAP.

He had spent most of the last two weeks dodging awkward confrontations in the media, sticking to harder-to-misinterpret written press releases, followed by straightforward conferences to deal with questions. All the PR people seemed to agree that going to the TV outlets directly just begged for bad limelight. His own opinion was that the Autobots were so disconcerting, that public reaction was unpredictable; it would only take one out of control audience member to cause a PR disaster. So although he made sure to keep the image of the Autobots in front of the world, it was generally done using pre-recorded footage of a variety of mechs. The live events were always done using one of the saner, calmer Autobots, generally Prowl. With the loss of Optimus Prime and the shift of command, the tactician had been far too busy with for many photo ops, however, so he frequently had to make do with less politically astute, although thankfully mature mechs.

"Why are you here? Are you really here to benefit Earth? What do you seek to gain from helping us fight your enemies?" the reporters all asked, repeatedly, whenever they had the chance to speak to one of the Autobots, much to Keller's disdain.

Most times, Prowl's simple and direct replies in his not-quite-monotone mid-western accent only fueled the public's opinion that the mechs were mindless machines. Ratchet's briskness and Jolt's sometimes-inappropriate jokes were frequently met with awkward tension and confusion. But the
one time Hound attended a press conference had been… interesting.

"Ah personally love this place! Y'all are so interestin', from a xenobiological and xenosociological standpoint, if ya don't mind me sayin'," the tracker replied, in probably the most authentic sounding Georgian accent Keller had ever heard. "Ah'm lookin' forward tah th' chance t'study a planet with such biological diversity."

The expressions of shock and speechlessness on the reporters faces in response to the accented alien's voice had been well worth the immediate public freak out of *Why the Hell Do They Sound Like Us?*

Despite the shock, it improved the standing of the Autobots to display the more "humanized" side of the mechs; it certainly helped to diffuse humanity's fear of the supposedly-nice aliens a little bit. Jazz was the perfect candidate for these types of events, especially the invite to go on Letterman, but it would have to come *later*, Keller told the Autobots. Jazz simply smirked and nodded, not complaining about a lack of trust. In truth, Keller was less concerned about Jazz giving a black eye to the Autobot image than he was with the idea that right now the existence of Jazz and his team was mostly unknown to the Decepticons, which in his mind gave them a slight advantage. The only one they had. Whether or not the time-traveling mayhem would ever be explained to the general public was a far, far off concern for Keller; he didn't think the media could handle one more startling revelation.

That was why, when Keller was jerked awake by his aide with an urgent phone call in-hand, he was concerned about both the danger to and the broader backlash from the public. They weren't ready, his pessimistic side kept whispering, they weren't ready for any of this.

They didn't have a choice, in the end. They never did.

"Was it him?" Ironhide asked immediately upon entering the command center. Keller looked at him through the screen, but let Lennox take the lead explaining.

"Visuals are still coming in, but yeah, we're pretty sure it was him," Lennox replied, working at the console. Keller couldn't see the video from his angle, but the looks on the mechs' faces told him they were seeing the same clips he had watched earlier.

It wasn't much, but damn their luck, it was Galvatron. He had been with several other fliers—no sign of the Fallen, however—and they had targeted an unlucky Russian oil refining facility. They destroyed the factory for the energy, Prowl explained after watching the security video that had survived. Galvatron was regrouping and was obtaining energon for his troops.

He was planning for war.

Keller had watched the footage several times, but it wasn't his level of expertise to try to judge what was happening. All he saw were big robots blowing up large factories and the occasional unlucky human. He kept his calm and let Prowl, Ironhide and Lennox deal with the information. It wasn't much, but it confirmed the Decepticons were back and willing to kill.

The mainstream news had not picked up on the report yet, but the fringe media had and Keller knew it was only a matter of time till the whole world knew. For now, he'd had two chats with the Russian Minister of Defense, and they had released the video to other governments worldwide, and he and his aides had made several calls to allies. They were all preparing for the next strike now; this attack and the photographic evidence of Galvatron would be enough to convince the world's governments they had a serious problem.
But that was not the only issue; Galvatron was a threat all by himself and he was a visible one. The world would immediately accept that fact, looking at his soulless red optics and massive silver form—one that was far more frightening now than it had been when he was just Megatron. But there were other concerns that perhaps even overshadowed the Decepticons themselves.

When Prowl had stepped aside, Jazz had taken over the console, so it was just him staring down at Keller. The DNI kept his gaze up with the unfamiliar newly reinstated Autobot. Jazz was visibly tense and seemed uncharacteristically grim.

"Ya need t' get yer government an' other governments lookin' fer th' drones, Director," the silver mech said bluntly. There was a pleading undercurrent to his words. "I cannot stress that enough."

Keller had expected that request. He had spent long hours dwelling on the drones, whatever they were. "...Are they truly that much more dangerous than the Decepticons?" he asked, rubbing his eyes roughly.

Jazz shivered, an impressive feat for such a large, metal creature. "They're worse. They're a thousand times worse, Keller. Please... you have t' believe me," he said, shaking his head. His eyes were still green and unsettlingly emotional. "Believe what we went through. Believe what we survived. Please don' ignore them, not now, not when Galvatron is actin' up finally."

Keller clenched his fists out of sight and fought the urge to rub his eyes again. He wanted to just walk away from this and let someone else have to deal with making decisions that could change everything, for better or for worse. This was his hand, though, the one that fate had dealt to him personally. He had chosen to come back to this position, knowing that someday, this would happen. He just wished he had had more time to prepare.

"It's gonna happen soon. Th' infestation," Jazz continued, his desperation melting into a pitiful dread. "Th' drones are comin', an' if we don't prepare now, they're gonna destroy us all... again."

A terrifying thought that was going to continue to claw at Keller's strength—that future that no one wanted was an ominous black cloud hanging overhead.

"...NASA and the NSA may not be enough. We're underestimating our opponents and we cannot allow that," he said at long last, looking back up at Jazz. "NATO and the UN Security Council will be informed about the drones and the threat they present. We'll handle this."

Jazz looked him straight in the eye—in a way that was surprisingly human for such an inhuman-looking being—and nodded. Keller sighed quietly and did as he promised.

They were met with suspicion, particularly by the Russians and Chinese, over requesting an increase in satellite and informational exchanges. They had to be concise about this; they had to share data constantly, without delay. It was a tense decision, but finally, the UN made the decision that all member countries would monitor any incoming foreign object that came even remotely close to the Earth. Any objects that came through the atmosphere would be tracked, and if it should land, it would be found immediately under the suspicion it was a drone carrier.

They could take *no* chances, Keller stressed over and over and over, praying his fellow leaders would take that sentiment and believe it.

So, they kept looking, for Galvatron, for Decepticons and for drones. They also looked for the Fallen, where ever he had gone to, but Keller wasn't sure what they could do if they found him. NEST and their allied armies kept preparing and the world slowly braced itself for the next twist.
It was already October and Sam was beginning to question where the hell all the time was going in his life.

Living on base wasn't exactly a picnic. He didn't mind the people or the actual location as much as the fact that there was a very tiny amount of space they could afford to give the civilians. The barracks were already filling up with soldiers being rotated in from England, Germany and Australia, so Sam and Mikaela (and now Miles) had taken up their own small corner of the dorms and tried to stay out of everyone else's way. Lennox was always busy, so Sam didn't want to mention how awkward it was, nor how annoying it was to have to keep to the soldiers' time schedules with wake-up calls and such, because honestly, Sam knew that was probably the most unimportant concern any of them could have at this point, and it didn't speak well for his commitment to the cause.

Galvatron was back, the media was panicking all the time, and Sam was feeling lost in the middle of everything. Bumblebee seemed much better than he had last month and he did his best to stay close to Mikaela and Sam, just to give them a semblance of company while the rest of NEST prepared for a full out assault. It was kind of intimidating, seeing and hearing all the war-preparations; it made everything so much more real.

His mother called every other day, which was a step up from calling every morning and evening. Sam couldn't tell her much, but after he explained irritably to his father that the reason he left home was to protect them, and that these phone calls were only giving the 'Cons more of a chance at finding them, both his parents agreed to lie lower. Both elder Witwickys decided to take an early (temporary) retirement to go stay with relatives in Oregon. His parents had already redone his Aunt Sandy's flowerbeds and reseeded the lawn. He hoped she could stand having them around for a while.

Joking aside, it was a small relief to know they were taking the threats seriously. Sam had enough problems of his own, figuring out what he could be doing to help with the war effort, fretting over the warnings brought by the time-travelers, integrating the other four civilians into life on the base and keeping Mikaela sane. He really didn't want to have to worry about his parents too.

And then there was Miles. The other teenager was crafty, so much so that Keller, Lennox and Prowl all missed it. Miles was smart enough to make it seem like he was a security threat, so he had to stay for an extended time on base until things calmed down a bit on the outside; Sam knew that NEST feared he'd run straight to the media with all sorts of negative commentary.

"Robots who kidnap people. Nice," Miles would mutter just loud enough to be overheard.

Miles wouldn't run to the media, Sam knew, as he wryly observed Lennox's harsh comments about the other teen. However, Miles was going to milk his image as a blabbermouth as much as he could just to continue to stay on base, the clever bastard. When Prowl found out he was being duped by the supposed-dupe, Sam knew the aftermath would be pretty funny, if not traumatizing for everyone involved.

Sam didn't rat his friend out, simply because he knew Miles would be useful as a distraction for the other civilians. As it turned out, Miles was better at handling the survivor humans than Sam ever had been.

After ransacking the vending machine, Miles had followed Sam to the small cafeteria area where the four other humans were finishing up their meals. Only Rachel refused to look up at them, choosing
to write furiously in a notebook Epps had given to her. Sam waved awkwardly, but Miles just charged forward fearlessly.

"Here," Miles said, offering Kass a candy bar without pause.

The British woman stared at the wrapped bar, uncomprehendingly. "Is it food?" she asked, taking it tentatively.

"Yup. Best kind ever. Chocolate!" Miles grinned and plopped down next to her. He looked over at Danny and Barns, who were looking at the food curiously, and instantly, the blond teenager fumbled inside his (actually Sam's) jacket pocket. "Right, I got some for you guys, too!"

Rachel staunchly refused the food and kept scribbling in her notepad. Sam watched as the survivors enjoyed the treat, eyes lighting up with delight after they figured out how to unwrap it. They laughed and had fun talking about the various junk foods they could now obtain in this world, at least for the time being.

…He also didn't miss how Miles' own eyes lit up when Kass thanked him. Oh, God.

That side of things he was willing to ignore as well, simply because he didn't have the patience. There were more important things to worry about than Miles hanging around the people Sam had been supposed to befriend and trying to romance a girl from the future.

That afternoon, Sam took the opportunity to slip away from his usual crew, seeing that no one really needed him around anyway. Before they left for Oregon, his mother had sent him three huge plastic tubs full of his possessions, and plenty of things for Mikaela as well. While Sam could appreciate the extra clothing and magazines, he could have lived without the photo albums or the long-winded and tearful letter from his mother. Plenty of other inane things, like a baseball mitt and ball, and a few comic books would be good distractions, but it was going to take up room.

Most of it he'd have to throw away or find somewhere safe on base to store. It wasn't entirely fair if he got to live as a civilian with tons of extra junk lying around, while the soldiers around them had to make do with, well, a rather Spartan style of living, especially when he had no idea when he would be sent overseas to another base.

So, while Mikaela was busy at the med-bay—as usual—and Bumblebee was doing actual work, Sam decided to sit just outside the barracks in the not-so-brisk air to get rid of everything he really didn't need. The books and magazines he'd keep, knowing life on base could get really boring, but he didn't really have the room for the sports equipment. He wondered if he could just give it to another person instead of just wasting the gear.

Maybe the survivors. Maybe they'd like to play some games. There was an idea…

On his left, he put the things he wanted to keep. To the right he put all the "out" items he didn't have room for, or just didn't want. Unsurprisingly, the right pile was smaller due to the fact Sam was keeping all of his clothing, but it was still piling up tall with books and two scrapbooks. The scrapbooks he'd send back to his mother, but the rest he'd just—

In between two more photo albums, Sam was surprised to find a picture frame. At first, he was confused as to why his mother would send an entire framed photograph when there were at least three other photo albums to use. Surely she knew he didn't have a freaking wall to hang stuff up on.

But it wasn't a photograph. Sam lifted the eight-by-ten frame up in the air and found himself gazing back at a simple piece of decorative paper.
He stared at the framed paper, mind trailing off to nowhere. It was the same as he last remembered it; crème colored paper with stark black and red inks in all the right places to let the reader know that Samuel James Witwicky was a high school graduate.

Whoop-de-fucking-do.

Sam forced himself not to throw the diploma aside in a burst of emotion. He didn't want to look at it. It made him think of his parents—and how he was disappointing them. It made him think of the education he was no longer taking part in. It made him think of how he was now far, far behind on his plans to get a job at NEST because of that. It made him think of the real reason for why he was sitting on a base in the middle of nowhere, doing nothing useful for anyone.


In a brief moment of dark pessimism, Sam realized that a diploma like that meant nothing. It was a piece of paper, a waste of space, because it wasn't like Sam was going to do anything with it. He wasn't going to go to college; not in a world like this.

It was just as useless as Sam was—something to hang around, be shuffled about, and forgotten on the shelf of time as being entirely inconsequential.

Quietly, Sam placed the diploma in the pile to his right and closed his eyes to try to clear his mind of the dark cloud settling over him.

"Sam?" someone called from above and behind him. Obviously, it wasn't human. Sam knew the voice anyway—staticky and friendly.

Turning, Sam looked up and saw his yellow guardian standing still a few yards back. "Oh, Bee..." The human forced a grin, because the Scout deserved at least that. "Hey, what's up? Haven't seen you around."

Bumblebee's face wasn't as expressive as some of the other mechs', but Sam was an expert at deciphering the various emotions on them. The Autobot was clearly amused as he moved closer and peered down at his charge.

"I was with you yesterday," Bumblebee said. He tilted his head, abruptly disappointed, at himself apparently. "I'm sorry for not being around more often, though."

"It's fine. You're doing your best," Sam said immediately, shoving the plastic crate in front of him to the side to give the 'Bot his full attention. He grinned a little bit more naturally this time. "How you holding up, big guy?"

Bumblebee shrugged. "I'm doing fine. What about you?" he asked as he crouched down more. "I know your sleeping area is cramped. I was hoping better arrangements could be made for you, but I don't know what NEST will be doing in the future, concerning dormitories."

Sam grimaced, despite trying not to worry his friend. "They're gonna be moving you guys around soon," he said, glancing back at the hangers, as if waiting to see Lennox or Simmons frowning at him. Clearing his throat, Sam looked back up at his guardian. "Um... I guess that means you're going to move, too...?"

That had been his fear, that Bumblebee wouldn't have a choice and would have to go where Prowl needed him to be. But thankfully, Bumblebee seemed to brighten at the mention of moving, which was a good sign.
"No. I've requested to be reassigned to the civilian guard," Bumblebee explained, cheerful. "The way Prowl has it figured is that most of Ironhide's team will be moved to Diego Garcia, but some will be sent to other bases as we have more Autobot landings, so we have more Earth-bound forward teams ready to move." He gestured around them, as if that elaborated things more. "The Plumas base will be mostly civilian and non-combatants."

Sam hesitated. "Wait, didn't that get us blown up last time, not having soldiers here?"

That earned him a wry eye-smile. "I will still be here as well as the survivor members and possibly other Autobots like Whee... WJ," Bumblebee said, gently teasing. "We were attacked here because of the valuable items we had here, such as intel and the shard. Once we don't have any of that here, we won't be a target, not unless the Decepticons are simply wasting ammunition."

"Right... so at least we can stay here," Sam said, frowning. He was grateful Bumblebee was staying, regardless of whether or not it was dangerous. To Sam, everywhere was dangerous; it was just part of this life.

"Yes. It will be less dangerous," Bumblebee replied. He looked back toward Hangar C. "Mikaela and Kass Hall will be staying here as the official on-site medics."

Sam blinked, surprised by that. Mikaela had told him she was making good progress under Ratchet, but he hadn't expected either her or Kass to be actually working full time any time soon. "What?" he asked, peering up at Bumblebee. "R-really?"

The yellow Autobot nodded, smiling again. "Yes. Ratchet will have to be on the frontlines. Besides, he would also be a target if they wanted to cripple our defenses," he explained. He shrugged, even though that statement was a little grim. "Mikaela and Kass will hopefully be adequately trained by that point, so they're our back-up medics to be on reserve."

Happy for Mikaela, Sam thought about what that meant. Having Ratchet away was a bit unnerving, in case they were attacked at Plumas, but he supposed it was rational to split their more important team members up—and even Sam knew medics were very important in a war.

It also made sense to keep the two human medics here, considering that the Decepticons probably didn't expect them to exist, at least not as apprentices to Ratchet. They'd still have back-up medics without the risk of Decepticons hunting them down for the purpose of debilitating their defense team. That was a good thing, at least as Sam understood it.

Then again, acknowledging the fact that being a medic made Mikaela a target in Decepticon strategy was a bit too much to deal with at the moment. Sam cleared his throat.

"Oh... nice. That's actually pretty cool," he said, drumming his hands on his knees. He glanced around the airfield beyond them, suddenly feeling a bit off again, that pessimistic fog settling in his gut. "So fewer soldiers, fewer mechs... looks like this place is gonna be kind of lonely."

Bumblebee followed his gaze before looking back down at the human. "Yes..." he trailed off. Slowly, he crouched and slid to the ground to sit. He hovered closer than before, worry tinting his optics as he asked, "Sam, are you alright?"

Apparently, Bumblebee could read Sam just as easily as the human could read him. Sam hesitated under the concerned scrutiny. He thought about lying, but... this was Bumblebee. He couldn't lie to him.

But it wasn't like Sam had an actual answer. He looked out to the side, suddenly unnerved. He didn't
Almost without thinking, Sam shrugged. "I don't know, Bee. Not really sure," he admitted quietly. He ran a hand through his hair, the chilled air nipping at his scalp. He laughed shortly. "I'm tired. Frustrated."

"Why?" Bumblebee asked, frowning. "Things seem a little better now."

That made Sam choke on another laugh. "You call Mega—Galvatron, whatever his name is, showing up better?" he asked, sarcastic. It was a lot of things, but definitely not better.

Bumblebee shrugged at his negative reaction. "We were expecting that. I meant around here, things are better than they were," he explained patiently. He was always patient when Sam acted like an idiot. "Miles seems to have finally drawn those four out of their shells, after all. Well, most of them. I'm sure Rachel will be an interesting test for all of us."

A cold feeling took hold of Sam's gut again and he averted his gaze. "Hmm."

He didn't want to think about that either.

There was a pause. "…Is that a problem?" Bumblebee asked, cautious.

Taking a deep breath and then holding it, Sam considered dropping it. Bumblebee was right there, however, and for the first time since he noticed the problem himself, Sam wanted to talk about it, no matter if it seemed like whining or not. He exhaled sharply.

"…Optimus… asked me to do that," he explained, avoiding looking back at Bumblebee, who listened calmly. Sam rolled his shoulders and started to drum his fingers again against his leg. "It's stupid, I know. Miles is doing great so far. I'm happy they're all getting better. Friendlier, whatever."

It wasn't right to be upset that Miles, who was still an alien robot novice compared to Sam or Mikaela, was doing exactly what Sam had been failing to do for the last three months. It wasn't right that Sam was upset about that either, but he couldn't help but feel just a twinge of jealousy when he saw his best friend manage to deal so well with the people Sam had just barely started to get to acknowledge him. It was as if Miles had been called to do this job, instead of Sam.

Instead of Sam… the person who had been asked to do it by one of the greatest people he'd ever known, a person who was now gone forever. Not doing his job was worse than simply messing up; for Sam, he felt like he was failing Optimus and his trust.

"Sam…" Bumblebee began. He looked sympathetic. "Give yourself time. There will always be things we need help with."

That's what everyone kept saying, but it did nothing to make Sam feel better. "Besides stocking shelves?" the teenager asked, scowling. That was pretty much all he could do—and the mechs did a better job at it than he ever could. Maybe if he was lucky he could get a job as official car washer.

Bumblebee wilted a bit, sending the human a strained look. "Sam," he began, but then stopped. He looked down at the pile and pointed a dark finger toward his diploma. "Are you throwing that away?"

Sam wanted to hide the diploma away, to just get it out of his mind and the conversation. Almost guiltily under the scrutiny, however, he picked the frame up and put it back over in the other pile to keep. "…No. Just, I don't want…" he began, words failing. He sighed heavily. "I don't know."
He didn't. It was all just beyond him right now.

Bumblebee's body creaked as he settled down more. "...You should keep this," the Autobot said quietly as he gestured at the diploma. "It's a sign of your achievements."

"What achievements?" Sam asked immediately, bitter at himself. He shook his head, but he then noticed Bumblebee had gone tense. He looked back up, surprised at his guardian's intense frown. "What?"

"Sam, you're so critical of yourself," Bumblebee replied, voice chastising and sad. He shook his helm, disapproving of something Sam didn't quite see. "You should be having fun with your friends. Yes, they may be doing helpful things around base, but that doesn't mean that what you can do doesn't matter. You're not useless. You're my friend, and I'm worried about you."

Thoroughly cowed, Sam looked away. "...Sorry," he managed to say, meek. He knew speaking like he was bothered Bumblebee, but sometimes he forgot how much the mech cared.

...It was actually rather comforting.

"Don't be," Bumblebee said, shaking his head. He wasn't angry, just concerned. Just like always, because Bumblebee was freaking awesome like that. Gently, the mech pushed the diploma back toward Sam. "Keep this. Your mother sent it for a reason."

"I can't just go back to college," Sam pointed out. He wasn't bitter; just... tired. They were all tired of losing things that mattered. He should have been grateful it hadn't been something important to give up.

Bumblebee seemed to draw back at that admittance, probably irrationally guilty, but he nodded. "True," he said. He leaned forward, speaking quietly. "Give yourself time. Give the world time to catch its breath a little." He glanced up toward the other hangars. "If you are upset about not achieving what Optimus asked you to do, maybe you're looking at it the wrong way."

The wrong way?

Then again... Sam looked at his hands, chest tingling with both shame and, well, reluctant acknowledgement of his issues.

He should feel happy about them getting along. He was happy. It might not have been his doing entirely, but at least Sam was seeing Optimus' last request of him being played out. That was a good thing. It mattered more than if Sam had been the one to do it, to be honest with himself. The mere fact that Optimus' request was being met, with or without Sam, was enough.

Sighing, Sam ran a hand over his face, exhausted. Bumblebee was right. He had to stop... this. Being miserable. It wasn't helping anyone. It certainly wasn't going to help Sam find things to do with himself or their situation.

"I was thinking..." he began, getting Bumblebee's attention again. The human stared up at the mech blearily, his thoughts trying to backtrack to their other problems, the ones that actually mattered. "'Kaela said we should really look closer at Mission City."

The yellow 'Bot in front of him seemed to mull over what Sam had just said, his mouthplates forming a frowning gesture.

"I'm not sure if that will be necessary, Sam," Bumblebee replied slowly. "Things have already changed."
Sam shook his head, remembering having the exact same discussion with Mikaela. "She said that was the point. It is, isn't it?" he asked. He motioned with his hands, trying to keep his explanation straight. "I mean, now that things have changed before, and then again, it doesn't matter if it's the same stuff now. The fact that it could change at all before at Mission City... that means we can still effect changes, right?"

It meant they could still do things—anything—and change could still happen. Just because things were falling back in line to the path Jazz's world had taken didn't mean they couldn't alter it again at a different point. Maybe some things were unavoidable, but they had no idea which things were or not.

That caused the Autobot to stop again to think, but this time, he seemed to be intrigued. "...True. I did not think of it like that," he admitted as he looked back down at Sam. "We are putting a lot of effort into looking into the future itself now. We are looking for both Decepticons and the drones, thanks to the survivors' information. We already intercepted movement up north, but now that attack in Russia is pointing a lot of our attention to the East."

"And the Fallen guy?" Sam asked, dreading any sort of answer on the matter. Thinking about that creepy mech was just too much for an ordinary person to dwell on.

Bumblebee nodded. "Him, too. We're still looking."

Earth was a big place to hide in. Sam did his best not to think about where the Decepticons were, or where the Fallen was hidden, simply because it was scary. They might not even be on Earth, either. They knew next to nothing about their enemies' location or plans. At least now that Mega—Galvatron—had made a move, they could start tracking the bastard down.

Glancing upwards, Sam wondered just what awaited them at the end of the long waiting game they were being force to play now. Part of him knew that he should take every moment of boring, frightening time and enjoy it.

Sooner or later, their peace would be overthrown and they would not be able to get it back. That much Sam was certain of.

"It's like some kind of crazy nightmare rollercoaster," he muttered.

Bumblebee shifted on the ground, door panels stretching a bit as he relaxed. "While I've never experienced something like that, I suppose you're right," he said, good humored. He extended his hand in support as Sam brushed himself off to stand. "Don't worry, Sam. We're still in the game."

Sam had to grin, even if the gesture was weak. "Just be safe, big guy," he said, shaking his head. "Don't take risks, any of you." Sam wouldn't be able to handle losing anyone else he cared about.

"We won't." Blue optics shone brightly against yellow armor. "Trust me on that."

Trusting the Autobots—all of them, especially Bumblebee—was second nature. Sam trusted them more than he trusted himself to get the job done right. They were strong like that, believing in each other. It made days seem less dark and less scary.

Feeling stronger was Sam's next goal for himself. He would not accept anything less, because he knew Bumblebee, Mikaela, and his parents were counting on him to be strong enough to not crumble under the weight of his own thoughts. Sam could do that. He could.

A clattering noise made Sam jump and peer past Bumblebee, who also turned to see what caused it. Miles Lancaster was cursing irritably as he tried to recover his balance after tripping over what looked like a bunch of cleaning supplies. He quickly looked up and started to beam when he noticed
Sam was looking at him.

…Seriously, NEST needed to either reevaluate Miles' status as a security threat or actually stick him with a babysitter, if he was just going to be running around base like this. Then again, the blond teen could slip away from anywhere like a phantom when he wanted to. Sam had always been impressed when Miles escaped from their kindergarten class almost everyday during naptime.

"Hey, Sam, we're gonna go watch Bluestreak kick Ironhide's butt at shooting cans off of the roof," Miles exclaimed as he walked up, grinning. He gestured back toward Hangar B as if it were some sporting arena. "Gray-Bot's got mad skill."

Sam took a moment to digest all of that. "Who's going?" he asked, surprised they were organizing something so silly.

"Me, Kass, her crew. I'd invite Mikaela but she's doing overtime with the Doc-Bot," Miles replied. His grin faltered a bit as he looked upwards at the Autobot present. "Uhh, you're welcome to come too, Bumblebee."

Bumblebee turned to Sam first, questioning. Sam stared back with uncertainty over it himself. He still felt sore about losing his position as a liaison, but maybe… he just had to start looking at the situation from the right perspective.

That's what Optimus would likely tell him, at least.

Looking back at Miles, Sam smiled. It wasn't as enthusiastic as Miles' was, but at least it was honest.

"Sure," he said, nodding. "I'll be there."

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For a mech who once was part of an elite team in the Decepticon Army, getting stuck with the job of a cargo mech was degrading, not to mention boring. Then again, Vortex reasoned during the quieter moments of the day, the action was appreciated. It gave him something to do while they waited for the next move by their enemies, something to help keep his mind off of said-enemies entirely. It didn't always work, especially not when the helicopter's dislike of idleness rose up against his immense dislike of his job.

A sharp whistling warning in Iaconian told Vortex he had messed up before he even noticed the actual mistake. He stopped what he was doing in front of one of the cargo platforms that the helicopters would move to Amedee for further transport, and looked up, partially surprised to see Ironhide walking over irritably toward him. The security officer had been walking with Prowl and Jolt, but apparently Ironhide had spotted an error in Vortex's half-hearted work.

"You're putting the energon stores in the wrong piles," Ironhide said, snappish. "That pile is going to Diego Garcia. Those crates are going to Kandahar."

Vortex frowned behind his mask and peered at the crate, scouring it for some sort of label to confirm this. Indeed, it had address markings on it, but not in English. Arabic, then. Vortex hesitated; he should have thought to download more language files, now that he had unrestricted access to the Internet. When he looked up again and saw Ironhide's scowl, however, the urge to apologize for not being prepared evaporated instantly.

"…Oh." Vortex shrugged and picked it back up again, forcing down the desire to throw it at the larger mech. "Whatever."
They could give him a job and tell him how to do it, but they couldn't make him act respectful toward slaggars like Ironhide. Only he, the twins, and Hoist were still particularly edgy around the refugee ex-'Cons; the other Autobots had seemed to accept them at last. Not that Vortex was pleased either way; he missed being able to inspire fear in those he despised.

But not much scared Ironhide, unfortunately. "This is a serious operation, rotorhead," he said, irritated, but interestingly not angry. He just sounded annoyed to have had to come over, though that didn't make Vortex feel any less insulted. "Try to pay attention to the details for those who are actually putting their sparks on the line."

With that, he turned away. Vortex watched Ironhide walk back, almost calmly, to where Prowl and Jolt were waiting. Vortex had to admit, it could have been worse; things had improved between their two groups if all that happened was a quick reproach. After all, Ironhide berated everyone, had even yelled at Prime when he had been alive, so it wasn't personal.

But Vortex was still pissed.

And so, using a move he once saw a rare sulking Danny pull with Wheeljack on one of the few times he had had to discipline the wayward youngling, Vortex tipped the energon crate over carelessly with his pede. It hit the ground hard, with its contents jostling inside of the wood, the sound loud enough to be heard across the distance between them.

"Oops," he said, sarcasm dripping like rain.

Ironhide whipped around and his engines made a decidedly threatening sound. Vortex held his ground, visor narrowing, and didn't move. It wasn't likely to end as a fight, but still—it would have been almost cathartic to have a reason to have a fight after weeks of nothing happening.

Of course, nothing did happen. The moment Ironhide turned, one of his Autobot companions quickly intercepted the weapons specialist. Ironhide didn't flinch when Prowl grabbed him by the shoulder armor.

"Enough. Ironhide, come on," the Praxian said firmly, pulling the larger mech along with him with surprising force. Ironhide reluctantly turned back around, glaring openly at Vortex in a wordless threat.

Well, there went his good mood. Vortex shoved the crates into the correct pile and then stomped back to their hangar. He didn't want to put up with political correctness or decency. He wanted a fight—for no reason. He didn't need a reason to enjoy tearing it up with someone who tried to mess with him. It had been too damn quiet around base.

He ignored Wildrider and Danny, who were at the little camp area, and decided to grab his own energon ration from the area NEST had set up with crates of pre-made energon for the refugee mechs' consumption. WJ was putting the finishing touches on his energon converter, so hopefully in the future their rations wouldn't taste so much like slag—

"Why did you try to start a fight with him?"

The voice startled him more than Vortex would ever admit. He turned and was forced to look down at the pink femme who had rolled up silently behind him, having followed him from all the way outside.

"What?" he asked, trying to cover his surprise with indifference as he put his ration down, suddenly not wanting it.
Arcee was frowning as she pointed at Vortex, mildly accusing. "I saw what you did. You were attempting to torque Ironhide off," she replied. She tilted her helm, curious, when Vortex suddenly laughed sharply. "What?"

Vortex had to laugh at her statement, though he quickly reverted back to indifference. "Never thought I'd hear you say torque," he said, shrugging. The femme was too self-righteous to use slang of any species.

"I've been around less than civil company for a while," Arcee replied, probably a little embarrassed. She continued onward with her accusation, unfortunately. "Regardless, Vortex, why did you do that?"

Why what? Why did he purposely tick their Autobot guards off? Vortex wanted to snarl at her idiocy, for even having to ask such a stupid question.

"Do you have to ask?" Vortex demanded, shooting her words back at her from weeks ago, unable to hold his anger back.

Arcee bristled. "You cannot tell me you are still holding onto the notion that these Autobots are your enemy," she replied, calm, but with a slight sharpness under her words. "You're not that foolish."

"Shut up," he hissed, moving backwards. He didn't want to deal with this. There weren't many places he could go to escape prying eyes on base, but now that they weren't imprisoned in the hangar, he could at least get away from Arcee.

The femme, sporting a brand new Autobot sigil, dared to move closer. Vortex's turbines whirled dangerously, but she looked up at him, fearless. If the helicopter had to admit it, she also looked desperate.

"Vortex, I speak out of concern for you and the rest of us," she said, shaking her helm. "We are forming a strong foothold here. We have a future here. We just need patience. That's all I can ask of you."

That was the same garbage Jazz kept giving them; that this was a better place, that this place was the key to a better future. Vortex clenched his fists and glared at the femme and at her ignorance. Sure, they had a head start now, but to what? What else awaited them except prolonged death and the end of the world—again? Instead of dying now, they had to wait and wait for it, without a single chance of stopping it.

How the frag was this better?

"We have a future here?" he asked, vicious.

"Yes," Arcee replied shortly, optics challenging. "You disagree?"

Vortex sneered behind his mask. "Do I disagree? Frag yes, I disagree!" he snapped. "I am sick to death of you and Jazz ranting about how freaking lovely this place is, or how great it is to be back with the Autobots." His hands flexed wildly as he tried to avoid actually lashing out. "How is this great? Galvatron is on Earth and the humans are only now looking for the drones. We're no better off here than where we were."

"Of course we're better off here!" she exclaimed, almost angry. "Even if we are forced to fight our enemies again, this is a second chance!"

"To die?" Vortex shot right back, his own anger rising. Standing there in the back of the hangar
yelling was not a good idea, but he didn't fragging care anymore. "We don't have a second chance for anything but failure. You're obsessed with fixing things that are already broken, done, and irreversible."

Arcee optics grew dark and she drew herself up. "Maybe you are just too concerned with failure to see past it," she accused. "You have no faith in yourself or anyone else."

Frowning, Arcee rolled closer, her irritation dissipating. Vortex could have handled her anger better than her concern, however. He couldn't understand why she was trying so hard—like Jazz—to make this work when it just wouldn't.

"Your brothers are alive again," Arcee began again, moving straight into an area Vortex was not in the mood to discuss. She went on, oblivious to the danger as she fished for a reason the helicopter would find pleasant. "Aren't you happy about that?"

That… did it.

"Do you feel your sisters?" Vortex retorted sharply, looming over the femme. He knew that would cut deep and he was glad.

Arcee flinched and rolled backwards, as if struck. "I—," she started to say, but her vocalizer fritzed out. She stared up at him, stunned.

A darker feeling flooded his spark; he didn't want to play nice anymore. He closed the distance between them and he loomed, relishing the torment he had just caused for the Autobot. He needed this. He needed to give her a glimpse into why he held onto that failure—it defined them all.

"You can't, can you?" he hissed, mercilessly digging the metaphorical blade deeper. "You put your sensors back online just like I did." He narrowed his visor, enjoying the devastated look on Arcee's faceplates under his shadow. "But there's nothing, is there?"

There was no pulse, no response on the other end of the line. None of them had spoken of the missing link, the link that should connect each of them to their Gestalt team but did not. They had gotten over it the best they could ages ago in the other world, but even Vortex had not resisted the urge to check now, in this world where their teams were supposedly still alive.

The cold, black abyss that had greeted them was the same and yet so much worse than the one they had faced during the many years they'd had their links closed, because they knew their siblings from this timeline were alive. Vortex had endured, but he saw how much it had bothered his companions, and it certainly bothered him although he'd never acknowledged it. Until now.

"It's just the same dead void. But you heard Ironhide. Your sisters are alive. And with you," he continued, engines snarling over his lowered voice. "The new you. The one that was supposed to belong here." Spark singing in malicious triumph, Vortex stepped back, pointing at Arcee's spark. "They have no room for you, because none of us were supposed to exist!"

Because they weren't supposed to. Vortex had watched his companions try to find a foothold in this world, to find somewhere they could actually belong. But they didn't belong anywhere. Not with the Autobots, who already had members exactly like them. Not with the Decepticons, who already had the same faces among them. Not as Neutrals, because that was never an option anyway.

They were nothing. It didn't matter if they died or lived. They had nothing to tie themselves down with, and pretending they did, with this so-called alliance with the Autobots, was just making matters worse.
Vortex was tired of being nothing.

He shouldn’t have said it out loud, however; Arcee’s hurt expression only faded slightly as the seconds passed. Vortex and the femme had always exchanged harsh words, but certain things over the last decade had been off limits for them all—like their factions, their past actions in the war, and their lost companions. He had just crossed that line and it was too late to take it back now.

It was always too late, he thought, trying to stay afloat amid all of the countless emotions he was feeling now.

Arcee was looking at him now with a guarded look, clearly getting a grasp over her own emotions before trying to respond. Vortex considered fleeing before he had to face her reaction, which he suspected would be harsh—but as it turned out, he wasn’t met with shouting.

He preferred the shouting.

"I… may not… be able to rebuild what I have lost… but I refuse to give up everything solely because of that," the femme began, voice rising. Arcee lifted her helm higher and met his gaze with an undefeatable amount of self-assuredness. Her green optics narrowed in defiance. "I will fight these monsters again, even if it kills me this time. I will not stand by and let the only home I have left, the only family I have left, be destroyed."

Vortex wanted to slap the self-righteous expression right off of her faceplates. He wanted to do something—something violent. He wanted to get angry, and he was—

But something stopped him. He didn't want to think it was guilt. He had no reason to be guilty, even as Arcee clearly was shaken by his vicious replies. She was still standing, though. It wasn't his concern.

"What of you, Vortex?" she asked, voice cold. She looked right at him, unknowingly piercing straight through his spark. She gestured around them, challenging. "Look your friends in the eyes and tell them what you plan on doing. Just what sort of choices will you make next?"

Vortex clenched his fists and fought the urge to hit her. "Frag off," he snarled, before turning around and putting as much distance between them as possible.

He couldn't hit her, not just because of the backlash it would cause with the Autobots. No, their eight companions would be even more troublesome to deal with.

So he left. He ignored Danny and Wildrider's questioning looks as he stomped past their encampment and headed right out the hangar doors. They didn't have guards anymore, not really. He didn't care about that anyway. He would have ripped the sparkchamber out of the next fragger to confront him.

Luckily for NEST, everyone avoided him, or were simply busy with their own duties. He made it as far as Hangar C, where most of the Autobots typically were, when he finally stopped and realized he still had not released his fists. He looked at them, suddenly taken aback by how angry he was.

Why was he so angry? There was no cause for it, no real reason. Arcee was a fool, but this wasn’t…

Vortex offline his visor and fought off alien, devastating emotions that rose up in his spark like the crest of a wave.

There was nothing.
He was useless.

There was… absolutely nothing he could possibly do to help.

Vortex clenched his hands into fists again, but stayed standing there. He glared into the metal wall, but did nothing.

Talking caused him to look up. He saw Barns walking swiftly with Lennox several yards away, talking rapidly about different things, Kass following. Conversation of war and what they could do to help drifted his way, but none of it fit him.

Vortex watched his friends depart and his spark flailed miserably in desperation. He wanted to be like Arcee or Thundercracker, but taking on the Autobot sigil was a lie. He couldn't pretend to be someone he wasn't. He could and would fight the drones or Decepticons when they showed up, but that was it. The humans and Autobots would never trust him with anything more. Perhaps… that would have to do.

It didn’t feel like enough, though. The feeling of uselessness never faded and it haunted his spark.

That feeling of uselessness melted into shame whenever his friends, especially Rachel, looked his way. He ignored their concerned questions over his melancholy and focused on the future and what little he could do to help.

Let Galvatron come.

Ripping his spark out would have to be Vortex's contribution, then.

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End Chapter 27.

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Chapter End Notes

Next, Starscream busts a move and Wildrider contemplates things.

A/NS:
-Sorry for skimming over humanity's reactions to the Autobots. We'll get to see tons of that later, though not within Apocalypse.
-Oh, yeah, drones. Didn't think we had forgotten about those suckers, did you?
-Vortex, darling, you had better come up with a plan for yourself soon… before others do it for you. ;)


Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Starscream steals the limelight and Wildrider finds reasons to become stronger. Barns, brace yourself, buddy. Thank you, Shantastic!

Another reminder: I have a twitter solely for updating progress on stories (plus occasional teasers): nan00kwrites.

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEST Alpha Compound
Plumas, California

"Starscream was just sighted over Moscow."

Turning around swiftly, Simmons saw Lennox marching in his direction, looking grim. The soldier hadn't always been so grim, Simmons noted dryly; he supposed that it was just a sign of the times. They had enough nonsense from the aliens, so that left the humans with the responsibility to have some couth.

"I heard," the ex-Sector-7 agent replied, closing his cell phone for emphasis. His liaisons in Washington had relayed the message just moments earlier.

Lennox said nothing about Simmons already knowing; it was not the time to comment on how their communication network needed to be improved. Instead, the blond soldier kept walking and Simmons followed, his stomach knotting.

This… was both good and not good. An interesting combination, surely, but Simmons had been involved with the more complicated aspects of running national security long enough that somehow this situation seemed vaguely normal.

"Managed to scare the ever living crap out of Putin's people and they've been all over Keller and Washington for the last hour," Lennox continued briskly, confirming what Simmons already knew. He let the other man talk though, waylaying commentary for professionalism. "He didn't attack anything, but he was with a whole horde of other fliers." Lennox paused for a moment as he opened the door to Hangar C. "I find it ironic that a video of giant alien robots destroying an oil refinery near the Sea of Okhotsk and killing several hundred people generated four phone calls, while a single fly-by with no interaction has already generated forty." Simmons shook his head in dark amusement.

Ironhide and Prowl were in the command center. Simmons had finally decided to learn and
remember their names and use them. Prowl was easy enough to recognize, being as creepy-quiet as he was, and it had been obvious from the minute he met him that forgetting or misremembering his name wouldn't generate much emotion. Ironhide on the other hand... he'd known Ironhide's name for quite a while, but had enjoyed the fuss the mech made when called something else—so much that he'd continued to "forget" for a while. But now that things were getting serious, Simmons had decided to get in the habit of using their proper names. He didn't want to insult one of them right when they were supposed to save his life. He couldn't believe that life-forms that supposedly lived for thousands of years were so prissy.

"We aren't going to rush in," Lennox told Ironhide, who was eager for action. Russia was still trying to get over the idea of aliens, let alone aliens that were mostly working with the Americans. Old habits die hard, especially when you were talking about national security.

Simmons almost wanted to say, Here, take them, but he doubted Keller would appreciate that.

"No, now we just have to convince the public that we're not just letting these Decepti-creeps roam free all over the globe, doing whatever they want, wherever they want," he said, tapping his foot impatiently. That oil-refinery mess was still being played on TV, no matter how many times Keller went on to say it was under control.

Prowl stared at him blankly. "We cannot do much else, considering that we do not know where they are based or what their goals are," he replied, ever the logical pain-in-the-ass.

Simmons scowled back. "Well, we should be working on that, now shouldn't we?" he challenged.

Lennox immediately began to grouch about how it was impossible to mobilize their troops, especially in foreign countries, with how fast the Seekers were. Their satellites and the foreign militaries could barely keep tabs on when the Seekers slowed down enough to be spotted. What they needed, Simmons thought darkly, was increased surveillance. The Autobots—the smart ones, not the psychotic sports cars that seemed to be growing in number by the day—promised to be working on just that. Their technology would be a huge help, but they weren't working fast enough.

Making a mental note, Simmons decided to harass the scary medic and the awkward scientist mech later. They needed to get moving on that project, ASAP.

"...I just wish we could get Starscream alone," he heard Prowl say. Glancing over at the creepy-smart 'Bot, Simmons frowned.

"Why?" he demanded, earning the aliens' attentions. "I thought he was too big and bad to deal with solo."

Starscream had been the single most aggressive Decepticon at Mission City, and as far as Simmons could tell, NEST hadn't figured out any way to change that. An inability to provide adequate air support was still their single biggest weakness. The Air Force was trying to compensate for their side's lack of fliers by releasing two advanced models of air craft that were designed for close range fighting (of aliens, specifically), but the descriptions given by the single survivor of the Raptor squadron at Mission City were supported by amateur video they'd confiscated after the event; these so-called Seekers were able to change speed, direction and form in fractions of seconds, nearly melting away before their eyes, to appear at a more advantageous point. The pilot had called him a ghost, and that was what the security video showed. Even continuous training with Thundercracker didn't seem to be giving the NEST pilots any kind of an edge in dealing with Seekers—the mech was able to "eliminate" them easily. Simmons dreaded going head to head with the Seekers, and it had been clear from previous conversations with the NBEs that they felt the same way. It made little
sense that Prowl would actively want to seek one out.

"Starscream is, or at least was, Megatron's air commander and most senior officer. His right-hand, despite his notorious back-stabbing," Prowl replied, returning Simmons' frown. "The knowledge he must possess in relation to our enemies, and the drones, would greatly aid us."

That made sense, in theory. Getting their hands on any of the Decepticons was probably a chief concern for the varying levels of government involved in this mess. They had to find the rotten bastards and probably the only way to do so would be to use one of their own to track their base of operations down.

Simmons plotted—which he did admit he might do too often, but hey, it got things done in the long run. He knew that they were already cleaning up smaller messes left by Starscream's earlier planning, those energon caches. They'd come to the conclusion that they were probably from pre-Fallen supply runs. Now the priorities of the Decepticons had changed, with their official leader back in power. It left a lot of openings in their plans.

They should be focusing on using the caches as bait. It was their only real lure. But if Galvatron was preferred to terrorize energy plants instead… their enemies undoubtedly realized the danger in going back to the caches. Simmons set his jaw and his eyes narrowed as he glared at the wall. The aliens were smart. Luckily, so was he.

Before he could tell his oh-so-pleasant company those previous thoughts, he was rudely interrupted by the sound of approaching cars. On this base, that was all-too normal, but Simmons braced himself when Lennox exhaled heavily and Ironhide seemed to give the approaching noise his entire attention.

"They're here," Lennox announced, distracting them. Simmons saw a caravan of non-military vehicles turning into the hangar bay. He recognized the silver small one, the not-dead-Jazz, but the remaining three were unfamiliar.

The silver leader stopped and Epps, in the process of getting out of Jazz, grimaced as he noticed the group in front of them. The line of three newly decontaminated Autobots behind him transformed only when Ironhide motioned at them and Jazz rolled back to transform as well.

"I take it everyone's heard the news?" Epps said, facing Lennox, who had been the one to tell them. The dark skinned human glanced up at the Autobots standing before him. "Please tell me we don't have to go rushin' over there now. We still gotta get these guys set up."

"The Russians lost track of the Seekers, don't worry—no intercontinental flights today," Ironhide said briskly. He moved closer with Lennox. "Let's get this lot sorted."

Simmons was not happy. Although he'd spent his entire life preparing to meet aliens, two years into this war he was genuinely sick of them and all the problems that they brought with them. Having the third forward team arrive was drastically unwelcome from his point of view. Sure they needed more soldiers, but none of the new mechs were fliers, so it wasn't truly fixing any of their current problems.

But this was his job, and damn if he wasn't good at it. He watched in silence, judging and waiting.

Unlike the last forward team, there were only three new Autobots. The tallest was a bulky dark gray, built more like Ironhide than any of the other Autobots on Earth presently. The slim white-silver mech next to him looked incredibly bored standing there, and the orange-red 'Bot next to him seemed a bit antsy.
"Please tell me y'all got names now, 'cause it'll make the paperwork go a lot faster," Epps began, glancing at the new Autobots.

Jazz chuckled as he moved back to let the humans see the new arrivals better. "Decided on th' way over, finally. This is Mirage, now our head of Special Ops," he explained, gesturing at the white-silver mech. "Th' tall, dark, an' handsome one is Trailbreaker, an' this here is Cliffjumper."

Epps made a funny face at the orange-red one. "Cliffjumper? I hope that ain't a reference to your battle strategy."

Cliffjumper stared at the human before looking over at Jazz, unimpressed. "Please don't tell me they're all like this," he drawled, causing Jazz to laugh and Epps to scowl. Simmons smiled in approval.

"No, the rest of us are worse," Lennox interrupted sharply. He motioned at Prowl. "Get them debriefed and do what you need to get, ah, Mirage set up with his CIA and NSA contacts," he ordered. "Ironhide, get the other two ready to speak with Keller. We're wrapping up movement plans tonight. The President wants Diego Garcia in operation by Monday."

Trailbreaker and Cliffjumper exchanged glances, probably chatting over their comms, but Mirage just watched in silence. Simmons frowned; he wasn't sure which he disliked more—the silent ones or the cheeky ones. Both were bad for entirely opposite reasons.

Diego Garcia (or Beta Compound, thanks to it finally being upgraded to service-ready status) would serve as their jump point into Asia and Russia, since apparently the 'Cons were taking advantage of the massive country's unobserved landscape. It'd be impossible to monitor entirely, but they'd do what they could with what they had.

"We need to discuss surveillance," Simmons announced, marching straight after Lennox, who didn't stop as he trudged after Ironhide. "I want open communications with the Russians, but leave that to Keller and me. You had better get their metal behinds ready to haul their bolts at a moment's notice, real soon. We are going to catch these little bluebirds, mark my words."

"Red Alert will love him," Trailbreaker suddenly said in a rumbling voice. Cliffjumper laughed and Mirage just sighed. Simmons pointedly ignored all three of them. *Aliens.*

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October was cold. Wildrider didn't like it. He had finally gotten used to it being sunny and warm, and now the sun was disappearing. How inconsistent and stupid. At least in *their* world, the temperatures were more constant.

But they were not in their world. He found himself comparing the two universes whenever something odd happened. Odd things happened a lot. Like Kass bringing the blond awkward human around and watching Bluestreak seethe openly. Wildrider almost wanted to poke fun at the Praxian, whose doorwings were always flared up and out in aggression when blond-boy came around, but after Bluestreak practically yelled at Jazz for mentioning it, Wildrider decided to just watch in amused silence.

Other things, like watching Rachel ignore Jazz and Jazz grudgingly ignore her back was unsettlingly odd. Very few fights had ever lasted more than a few days before, but Jazz was busy and Rachel easily found things to do, so they spent less time together. Now that they didn't have to rely on each other as much, they could avoid the problem, which meant they could make their fight last longer. Wildrider disliked it, but not nearly as much as Thundercracker, since he had to be in the middle
between them. That situation was out of Wildrider's hands, however.

In their world he would have played peacemaker, would have spent hours trying to get Jazz and Rachel to make up, trying to get Bluestreak to accept Kass' friend. Here... he'd stopped interfering with those things, and when Danny had asked him why he hadn't tried to edge his way into the various problems of their friends, he hadn't been able to give her a reason. Before, he would have done it out of boredom or concern; he disliked long-term fights. It made a Gestalt weak when those fights happened.

But... Wildrider didn't say much these days. He didn't say much after Jazz asked them to join the Autobots, something they had all seen coming, but didn't like regardless. Wildrider could only stare the Autobot sigil on Jazz's chestplates. He stared, mostly waiting to see the green optics disappear into blue again. They hadn't yet, but it was... unnerving.

Wildrider had nothing to do. Vortex did mindless work, moving boxes. Thundercracker was doing training practices with the humans. Bluestreak, Arcee and Jazz were all too happy to help the Autobots with chores or planning strategy. Even their humans started to find work in odd places. Rachel mostly stuck close to camp, but would often disappear with Kass to the med-bay to watch Kass become the medic Wheeljack could never properly make her into before. Danny and Barns used to be Wildrider's chief companions, but today, Barns had been called away for some reason that left Wildrider sitting there... alone.

He disliked loneliness. More than anything. It made his tanks squirm and his spark violently twitch.

But what could he do? There was nothing. He did odd jobs, for an odd world. But he had no purpose. He watched as his friends tried to climb higher; but what they were climbing to, he wasn't sure.

He found Danny just outside of the hangar. At first, he was concerned, because she was on the ground. The cement floor turned into the asphalt in front of the hangar, but it was still uncomfortable for squishies (Kass had complained about it, loudly).

But Danny wasn't trying to sleep on the floor, nor was she lying there hurt. She was... doing something... weird. Wildrider walked closer, wary, watching with both interest and confusion. Danny was facing the ground, lifting herself up and down with some degree of difficulty against the ground's surface, as if trying to push it away.

"What are you doing?" he asked, frowning deeply as the human continued to push uselessly against the ground.

Danny grunted and was clearly straining to continue the movements. "Exercising."

Wildrider watched her for a klik longer. "...Why?" he asked, optics narrowed. She wasn't going anywhere and it wasn't like this appeared to be training of any sort. Humans had very odd training methods if it was.

Regardless of how much straining she was doing, Danny smiled. "Cause Rachel had a point in saying we don't get enough exercise now since we're stuck on base," she explained, after stopping and sitting up. She stretched and grimaced a little. "We gotta stay sharp for our enemies, right?"

He could understand that kind of thinking—just not from Danny. She was not a warrior. She was stronger than she looked, but she was still... Danny. Wildrider continued to frown at his friend.

"...Right." He crouched and peered closer at the human femme, who was now stretching her legs...
even more. "You want to fight?"

Danny laughed, breathless. "Of course not. I just don't want to be caught off guard, you know?"


Standing straight, Danny paused. "...Besides... Dr. Doherty said that physical activity... helps to, you know... distract you," she said, voice quieter, tenser. She smiled up at him anyway. They were nearly face-to-face like this. "Helps you get over emotional things."

He could see how her eyes were full of other things than her usual smile. She was still pained. He knew that pain, within his spark.

"That is stupid," he accused, optics narrowed.

Danny still smiled and shrugged. "I dunno. Epps showed me push-ups, so I tried it. I'm just trying to do what I can," she said. "I'm gonna go running around the hangars. Wanna race?"

While racing had always been a fun pastime for them, Wildrider shook his helm. He didn't want to run around the base. It still felt too open. He didn't want to do anything anymore.

But he had to. He was starting to feel the pressure of nothingness and it was not pleasant. Wildrider had a few options, just like Vortex and Thundercracker, but somehow, nothing fit. He wasn't allowed near other humans; the Autobots were too panicky. He had no interest in being a storesmech or lifting crates.

Slowly lifting his helm, Wildrider peered down the row of hangars. He saw a familiar silver form disappear into the one all the Autobots hung around.

He had to do something. Or lose what was left of his mind.

...He had one purpose, after all, one that even fifty years in Hell could never erase from his frame.

He found them—Jazz, Ratchet, Ironhide and Prowl talking together in Hangar C. The frontliner Sideswipe was also there, but Wildrider only cared about the officers. He needed them for this. Or rather, he wanted them to need him.

Jazz noticed him approaching and started to wave in greeting, but Wildrider cut him off by stopping just a few yards away. He stared up at the Autobots, who turned and seemed to frown at his appearance. Wildrider didn't care what they thought.

"I want to be soldier," he said, voice cutting through the air, startling the mechs in front of him.

For a moment, none of them said anything. Jazz looked speechless and the Autobots just looked surprised. Ironhide's optics narrowed slightly, suspicious, but Wildrider found himself staring back without the slightest intention of backing down. Not on this.

Jazz spoke first, visor wide, wary. "...'Rider?" he asked slowly.

Wildrider clenched his fists at his sides. "I want to be good soldier again. I want orders. I want bosses," he said, ignoring Jazz's expression. He looked between Prowl and Ironhide, the true leaders of the Autobots now. "I want mission, yes?"

"You have to be joking," Sideswipe said, barking out a laugh. He wasn't taking Wildrider seriously. "You're a glitch with legs."
Wildrider, however, *was* serious. "I can fight," he snarled. "Send me into battle and I vill kill anyvone you vant." He looked at Jazz pointedly. "You tell them. I fight vell, even vith others. I vas made to fight vith allies, as gestalt member. I function best in team."

Ironhide's engine rumbled lowly. "Look, we have enough problems with minor glitchheads, we can't afford to have someone out there just looking to blow things up—" he started to say, irritable.

That would not do. Wildrider stepped closer, his own engines louder than any of theirs.

"Listen to me, Autodolts—," he started again, dropping his accent if only to get their attention. It worked; they all looked at him with varying degrees of surprise. "I am a survivor of the same Hell as Jazz and Thundercracker, the same as the four humans. I have every reason to fight—and I will."

Whether it killed him or not—should Starscream, Galvatron, or even the Fallen come before him, he would kill them. He would kill them first, or at least die trying. He would die trying long before he ever let those empty-sparked monsters come near the very few things he had left that were good.

Jazz stared at Wildrider, his wary pity fading rapidly. "Wildrider… I know you will," he said quietly. He stepped forward and clasped the taller mech's shoulder, his visor dimmer. "I know yer a good solider. I think ya should fight alongside us. I'd be honored, mech."

Wildrider had anticipated a fight from the others. Ironhide still didn't look pleased and neither did Ratchet. But no one said anything. They didn't refuse him.

"…Wildrider, taking on the Autobot emblem is more than just agreeing to fight for us," Prowl said after a moment. He was as expressive as a rock, his optics cold, which always made Wildrider uneasy. "We have codes of honor that the Decepticons did not. Our ethical standing is just as important to follow as our military core—"

"Yeah, yeah, Autobots so morally superior," Wildrider interrupted, irritable. He motioned at himself with a scowl. "I play nice vith squishies for ten years. I play nice vith Autobots. I von't hurt anyvone not needing to be hurt. I *only* hurt enemies of gestalt—who are now Decepticons. I vill *only* hurt Decepticons under Galvatron."

"We could always use the muscle," Sideswipe said suddenly. He smirked. "Or a distraction. He moves fast enough, right?"

Wildrider sneered at the red Autobot. "You so funny, split-spark," he said, though the Lamborghini had definitely just improved his respect level in Wildrider's mind. Wildrider wouldn't mind being a distraction. As long as it gave him some sort of role in this war, he would do *anything*.

Engines rumbling lowly, Prowl showed a bit of his internal frustration by running a hand over his face. He reminded Wildrider of Kass like that. Or Thundercracker, which was an odd sort of revelation. "You truly wish to join the Autobots?" he asked.

"I refuse to allow this unless I clear him medically," Ratchet spoke up before Wildrider could. He didn't flinch at all when Wildrider glared at him. "I don't care. You're *glitched*. I can't clear you for combat if you're twitching like all your wires are crossed upstairs!"

Sometimes Wildrider missed the lack of care the Decepticon higher command had for their underlings; a glitched mech that could still carry a weapon was good enough to go into battle. The Autobots were just so fragging *anal*.

"But if ya clear him?" Jazz interrupted, speaking up for his friend.
It was amusing to see how much the medic seemed to struggle with an answer. It was clear what that answer would be, of course. They didn't have a choice; they needed warriors. Wildrider waited smugly.

"...I don't have a choice then, which fragging moron decides to throw their life into the smelter, do I?" Ratchet finally bit out, engines growling. He turned and glared at the Praxian next to him. "Prowl, this is on you."

"Rather, on Ironhide," Prowl replied dryly. He looked at the grumpy weapons specialist in question. "If you two can cooperate together on the field of battle, I can see Wildrider's strength greatly aiding you there, Ironhide."

The old mech scowled, though he always did that. "Hmph. We'll see." Ironhide turned and glared right at Wildrider, who sneered back. "We don't have room for mindless rampage, Neutral. You follow my orders or the orders of another Autobot officer, and only that."


"Wildrider takin' orders," Jazz mused out loud, gaining all of their attention. He grinned at his taller friend. "That'll be a sight."

Wildrider snarled and Jazz ducked gleefully away from a half-hearted swat. Inside, Wildrider felt lighter, however.

One by one, they'd all be helping to bring Galvatron down. Wildrider prayed it would be him to do it—for Wheeljack, for his friends, and for his own spark that begged for vengeance.

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After putting it off for far too long, Barns finally made it to Hangar C.

It was a nerve-wracking experience to wander around the base alone, but it was even more unnerving to be summoned to come alone. Barns had considered, just briefly, dragging Danny along with him, but that was a ridiculous idea. Not only because Barns knew that nothing was to be actually feared from going to meet the Autobot who asked for him, but also...

It was simply because the Autobot who asked him was probably the last person Danny would ever want to meet in close quarters, alone.

Most of Hanger C had been entirely rebuilt after the base was attacked in August. Epps had asked Barns to meet with WJ in his "lab," which apparently was just a room next to Ratchet's med-bay. It was reassuring to know Barns would be close by to Kass and maybe Rachel during this discussion, but it was still uncomfortable to walk up to the lab doors and peer inside.

He saw only one mech inside the small room. It was even smaller than the med-bay was and only one large mech could probably fit in inside of it. WJ was just as massive as his doppelganger had been, so Barns was surprised he didn't have to stoop lowly over the row of tables that probably served as his meager workstation.

Steady breaths.

"Ah, WJ?" he said, causing the giant mech to turn and look down. "You called for me?"

WJ's earfins brightened and he seemed cheerful. "Yes!" he said, moving closer. He paused and seemed to look back at Barns, uncertain over something else. In the end, the earfins shone a little less
brightly and WJ continued on, polite. "I… hello. You are Barnaby Rancourt. It's a pleasure to finally speak with you."

It was the manners, really, that made Barns think of his old friend who shared the same face as this mech. There was still a stiff formality to his language and behavior—more alien. Barns took Kass' advice and focused on those differences.

"You too," he replied, equally polite. He nodded, knowing that a handshake was a bit out of question for their species.

Regardless, WJ seemed to become more formal if anything. He did not crouch; he stood tall and reserved, crossing his hands against his armored chest in humility. "As I have said to your friends before, I apologize. For everything," WJ said. His earfins flashed lowly. "I… I was not certain I should even ask you to come here as it was."

Barns shook his head. "No, no, it is alright. You said it was important," he replied. Smiling thinly, Barns tried to be reassuring. "As Kass told you, you have nothing to apologize for."

There were many things that had gone wrong within their universe, but none of it was WJ's fault. His presence there was as innocent as that of Barns and his group. It was just miserable chance and there was no way Barns would ever blame someone for bad luck.

WJ considered the human in front of him for a long minute. Barns could hear the gears turning inside his helm as he thought.

"…Humans astonish me with their mercy," WJ said at length, again humble.

Barns smiled tightly. "I've been told that before," he said. By a mech a long time ago.

WJ shifted on his feet and seemed to debate with himself again. It ended quickly. "Ah… right. So." The mech abruptly got back to business, which of course Barns was still trying to figure out. "I heard that you were the one to discover the anomaly of your time travel situation."

That was… unexpected. "Euh…?" Barns blinked up at the Autobot. He could hardly claim he discovered anything to do with their situation, or time travel. He just pointed out one of the problems with the theory.

"The dimension hop, instead," WJ amended quickly. He was happy over something, which only piqued Barns' curiosity more. "Prowl and Ratchet have been filling me in on the first real discussion you had about the matter, prior to my arrival to Earth."

"Right…" Barns answered, watching as WJ moved away from the door and headed back toward the odd table by the wall. It was made of black metal at the top, unlike the silver tabletops everywhere else in the room and on the base.

"Well, from Ratchet's understanding, you had said you remembered how the machine was put together, correct?" WJ asked. He motioned for Barns to follow him and the human acquiesced, hurrying over to the mech's side.

Barns frowned up at the mech as he stopped short of the table. "Yes. Why?"

"You had also mentioned that you were not able to tell if the machine was a true space bridge, or a time travel machine," WJ continued, turning around to look back at him properly again. His earfins glowed pleasantly with his tone of voice. "Considering that only a scientist, such as my other self, would be able to tell the difference, none of you would have been able to tell if it had been."
“Yes… true,” Barns agreed, still trying to figure out what the point in this was. It was important that they eventually figure out how their Wheeljack had sent them to this world, but hardly a chief concern with the war looming before them. “Why are you asking now? To see if it was?”

WJ nodded. “Correct. If you could recall the schematics of how my previous—your Wheeljack—built the machine, perhaps I can discover exactly what he did to send you through time as opposed to the planned teleportation.”

He wanted Barns to describe… the time machine? All of it? Barns blinked up at the scientist, mildly horrified as well as amused. He knew pieces of it, perhaps the order of where parts went, but… it would appear that WJ was still quite new to human biology and neurological abilities.

“I am afraid human memories are not that precise,” Barns explained slowly, embarrassed. “I would not be able to give you detailed descriptions of the machine.”

For a moment, WJ seemed to stare uncomprehendingly at the human. The blip passed and WJ drew back a little, earfins flashing once.

“Oh… I forgot,” he said, almost sheepish.

Barns tried not to laugh, though he was feeling almost guilty over his inability to help. "Perhaps you could ask one of our mechs?” he offered. "They could pull up a memory file or image.” He was certain at least Jazz or Thundercracker would be able to help.


"No, it's fine,” Barns replied, laughing weakly. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his still too-stiff jeans, awkward. "I wish I could help you or the others in some way. I am willing to fight the drones, but other than that, I feel quite useless.”

"Nonsense,” WJ said, surprising Barns again. "You are highly intelligent, I am told, compared to average humans.”

The matter of fact way he said that was startling. Barns smiled anyway; it was almost comforting how much more alien this mech was.

"Thank you,” Barns said, nodding.

"You're welcome,” WJ said, ever polite. "I apologize for dragging you out here regardless.” Suddenly pausing, WJ turned back and peered at Barns curiously. "Would you like to see what else I am working on?”

The abrupt change of conversation was again startling, but Barns had a feeling this was just how Wheeljack was. Theirs had always been patient, forced to become slow in the company of those who couldn't follow his leaps in though. This one had not been "trained" by raising a small child, Barns realized. He didn't know whether to think that was amusing or just uncomfortable.

"Euh… oui,” he said at last, honestly curious. He felt increasingly uneasy when WJ offered him a lift up, and he climbed onto the unfamiliar hand, heart pounding for ridiculous reasons. "What is it?”

WJ placed him gently on the edge of the table and Barns marveled at the flat, glossy black surface. It was like peering into space, it was so dark. Barns flinched when WJ lowered the lights in the room to a dim glow overhead before turning back to the table and the human.
"Just more data charts for Prowl," WJ explained, clearly happy to be able to talk to someone about his task. "He gave me some of the data Jazz and Thundercracker provided, about drone sightings."

Barns gasped and whirled around. "You found them? !" he asked, heart racing suddenly. The drones—if they found them now, that could give them a huge lead—!

To his disappointment, WJ shook his helm. "No, sadly..." he said, grim. "There is nothing to suggest a correspondence of drone locations here as compared to your world."

That was a huge blow to all of their hopes. Barns grit his teeth. "Merde." There had to be something they could do. He couldn't... he could not just stand there, useless, while the fate of their new world was at such a great risk.

"Indeed." WJ moved to the side and tapped lightly on the black tabletop. His earfins flashed brightly, surprising Barns with the sudden change in his mood again. "However! I was inspired to conduct further research not on the drones, but rather, on you."

WJ's oddly cheerful change in mood was odd. "...Me?" Barns asked, watching the scientist curiously.

"You and your friends," WJ amended. He plugged a cord from his wrist into the console on the table. All at once, the black top began to glow. Barns watched in amazement as the tiny lights underneath gleamed. "I believe I have discovered a link between your arrival and the gamma ray burst that my colleague Perceptor has been investigating."

Barns gasped when all of the tiny little lights embedded in the black, glossy top suddenly shot upwards. He moved to the edge of the table to fully see what was happening above him. The lights were green now and were suddenly suspended in mid-air. Instead of just being beams, however, Barns could see they formed actual shapes.

There were a series of shapes that hovered in the air above him, only coming up to WJ's chestplates in height. It was like looking at three-dimensional circles, only the circles were irregular and often misshapen. There was a second array of colored objects, Barns belatedly realized. They were fainter and blue in color, lining up sporadically behind the green markers.

It was a hologram. Barns stared, jaw hanging open in unabashed awe. "Amazing..." he breathed.

WJ chuckled faintly to the side. "It's a holo-map I have constructed from the data that Perceptor sent. He has been studying an increase in the number of gamma ray shifts in this sector of space." WJ's earfins flashed again. "What I have found is absolutely astonishing!"

"I do not understand," Barns said, eyes huge as he took in the map. It was all so much to absorb. He could not see any data in the blobs, or markers he realized.

WJ was politely slow, however. "Well, to be straightforward about it, this is you," he said, pointing at a huge blob of green light toward the right end of the table, nearest to Barns. "The green data is all the gamma ray shift data I have managed to take from Earth's catalogues, plus Perceptor's own input. I have managed to compound it down to visual data, in addition to a time line." WJ seemed to smile as Barns gawked at the map still. "From my records and his, I have managed to compare the date of your arrival to Earth with the gamma ray burst detected through this section of space-time."

The blue lines underneath were the timeline then. Barns stared up and down the large, very much unstraight time data. Where it floated just underneath the bigger green jab of light, Barns realized that this was the most comprehensive example of how wrong humans were about time. It wasn't a
straight line. Things overlapped, meshed and then separated again. How WJ was able to display it so simply, and link it to events, was amazing in its own right.

What he was suggesting was even more shocking, however.

"So, you are telling me that the gamma ray shift your friend detected, and our arrival on this Earth, correspond?" Barns asked, throat dry as he turned to look up at the large Autobot.

"I am still working out the exact measurements, but I believe so, yes," WJ replied, looking happy over his discovery. His excitement faded a little as he tilted his helm at the data map again. "It's peculiar, only if you consider the method of your arrival."

Still trying to get over the fact that their arrival to Earth had such far reaching and cosmic prevalence, Barns was barely about to keep up. "What?"

WJ shrugged, the first time Barns had ever seen the very-alien like creature do so. He was learning. "Gamma ray shifts of this nature typically only occur in the event of a true space bridge usage, such as with teleportation. You didn't teleport, of course, you used it as a time machine. From the proposed theories of space-time manipulation, there would have been an increase of what your science calls photons and neutrinos." WJ sighed. "In any matter, I thought it was an interesting occurrence to take note of."

Barns nodded slowly. "…Yes…" Turning back to the map, he tried to understand it more. He pointed at several different points, desperately small compared to the table and WJ alike. "What are these smaller spikes?"

Besides the giant blob that represented his group's spontaneous arrival into this universe, there were several other green spikes that stood out on the map. The closer Barns looked, the more little, almost miniscule dots appeared. There were still some that he could easily see, even compared to the bigger one.

"Other gamma ray activities I've noticed on Earth, using your own satellite data NASA has provided. Just for comparison," WJ replied, peering closer.

The human started to nod in acknowledgement, but stopped. Something caught his eye. Their green marker was toward the end of the data line, obviously, and several littler ones came after it, but many more before it, if Barns was reading the timeline correctly.

But there was one other large blob—not nearly as large as the refugees' marker—only a short distance from the "present". It wasn't huge, but it was certainly large enough to be noticed.

"…Why is this one so large?" Barns asked at last, walking along the edge of the hologram to peer closer at the green marker, as if he could understand it better that way. "I mean, compared to the main event of my group's arrival?"

WJ stared at the map, clearly taken by surprise by the man's question. "…I did not think it was of importance," the scientist admitted. He sounded curious, however, so Barns knew he wasn't upset over the question. His earfins flashed brightly. "Hold on."

The data spontaneously changed before Barns, causing him to jump slightly. The blue timeline faded to the "back" as a new line of colors appeared. They were centered solely toward the end of the timeline, though several blips of yellow appeared at sporadic placements through the greens and blues.

"What did that do?" Barns asked, baffled by the new yellow data. What were they supposed to
WJ was, just as his duplicate Barns had known as a teacher, patient as a saint. "If you see here, the yellow markers are NEST security net disruptions, such as the two markers right under the gamma ray shift, which is still the large green marker," the Autobot replied, gesturing at the refugee marker. "Here, the two large ones correspond."

Barns could understand that; their arrival hadn't just been noticed through the gamma rays. NEST had responded quickly to the disruption in their security net.

But under the second largest green marker, there was another yellow blip. Smaller than theirs, but still noticeable.

And that meant one thing.

"...What are the two other markers here?" Barns asked, feeling incredibly uneasy as he looked closer. There were two yellow blips under the second large green one. Two.

WJ moved closer as well, optics still paling in comparison to the glow of the hologram. Barns could almost hear the gears turning, quite literally, behind WJ's masked faceplates.

"That green marker is the gamma ray shift that Perceptor started tracking several Earth years ago. Because of that, I came to Earth in his place. He hadn't discovered the origin yet," he said quietly, optics narrowed. "The second largest disruption in NEST's logs are right below it."

Barns slowly looked back to the holo-map. "...You... don't... think that...?" he began, dreading an answer, because if what he was assuming was correct, that meant something much larger than just an anomaly.

WJ leaned closer, optics huge. "I believe we have just discovered the arrival of the scientists," he said, awed.

All at once it made sense—if there had been two other scientists to cross through time and space to arrive on this Earth, naturally it would have been detected quite like Barns' group had. That included NEST's security reports and the gamma ray readings Perceptor had picked up on.

It confirmed there were at least two Transformers somewhere on Earth, unaccounted for and out of their established timeline, and that was mildly terrifying for Barns to contemplate.

"Mon dieu!" he breathed as he gawked at the holo-map, unable to do much else. "I cannot believe it!"

This proved all of their theories! Clearly, NEST had picked up on the disturbances in their security net, but the two unidentified mechs had slipped away somehow and NEST had labeled it as a false alarm. It was the only conclusion Barns could come to. The mere fact that the NEST report matched so perfectly with the gamma ray burst was difficult to discount—

"Neither can I," WJ suddenly said, interrupting Barns' train of thought. The Autobot appeared rather morose compared to Barns' delighted hysteria. "The dates are wrong."

All at once, Barns felt less excited and more confused. He faced the Autobot and frowned.

"Quoi?" he asked. Looking back at the data map, he could still see the blue timeline hovering behind the yellow markers now. He couldn't read it like WJ could, but he wasn't sure what could be wrong about it.
WJ pointed at the two scientists' blip, earfins glowing lowly. "The gamma ray shift and the corresponding security net disruption are not in 2007, obviously, or else the net disruption would not have been there at all because NEST had not been established," he said. The yellow markers only began a few spaces before the incident, now that Barns noticed. WJ hesitated. "...This was in 2008."

Barns stopped and stared at the data before slowly looking back up at his companion.

...2008?

That... was wrong. It had to be. Mission City had occurred in June of 2007, not 2008. Mission City was where the scientists must have intervened, because that's where the timelines diverged. It had to be 2007. This... made no sense.

"...What...?" Barns asked, astonished. "How... can that be?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Rancourt," WJ said, slowly shaking his helm. He did manage to smile down at the human. "Thank you, for pointing that out. You've helped to narrow the mystery down even further."

It was an important discovery all right. It changed a lot, if WJ's data mapping was accurate. WJ told Barns that Prowl and the other NEST officials would be made aware of the changes. The search for the missing scientists was far back on the NEST to-do list, but it was still important. Perhaps they'd get real answers someday, when they could push the threat of the drones and Decepticons aside first.

That still left Barns reeling as he walked back to his friends. He didn't talk about it to those who were still there, getting ready for bed. He would tell them in time, if Jazz didn't first, but for now... Barns felt trapped within his own thoughts and tried to stay within them, if only to try to figure out the mystery behind this all.

Who were they? Why... why did they do this? Barns could barely imagine offering up his life to build a machine that might or might not work. They had given up everything, those eight scientists... for this. And now, those two missing ones were the only creatures who knew the truth. If they were alive, why hadn't they tried to find the Autobots yet? Where they were, in this brand new universe, was an even greater mystery.

...Why 2008?

Barns ran a heavy hand over his face, exhausted as he tried to figure it out. It was hopeless to try. He didn't have all the pieces to this increasingly complex puzzle.

Lying there on his cot, Barns had not expected any of his friends to lay awake longer than him. He always fell asleep last now, at least of the humans. He couldn't sleep well. He hadn't been able to since coming to this place. It just... was impossible.

But that night, he was surprised when he saw Danny sit up in her own bed and peer over at him. She stared back in the near-darkness, her form silhouetted by the faint lights coming up over their container wall from outside.

With surprising stealth, Danny slid out of her sleeping bag and sat facing Barns. He couldn't really see her face, but they were close enough that her knees brushed against the side of his cot. Barns waited for a moment before silently sliding as far as he could. Danny was small, which helped her to be able to climb on the cot and curl up next to him.

At first, neither spoke. Barns wrapped an arm around her and let her cling to him. It wasn't desperate.

"Hey," she said quietly. Her breath tickled under his chin and he smiled, despite his anxiety.
"Salut," he replied.

Danny pressed her forehead against his collarbone. At least now that they were eating properly, maybe it wouldn't be so uncomfortable for the skinny humans to embrace. "What did he want?" she asked.

She never mentioned WJ by name, even after Kass had told them all of the name change. Barns ran a hand through her hair and left it there, considering.

"We're looking for answers. About our arrival here," he said. "It's very confusing, though. I'm not even sure what we know now."

Danny was quiet in his arms for a moment. "How are we going to beat the Decepticons if we can't find the drones?" she asked, voice barely audible.

Barns closed his eyes. "I don't know, Danny."

It was so, so difficult to see how this could end in a good way for any of them. They were running out of time, despite the definite lead they had had with all of the future survivors' intelligence. With the Decepticons creeping closer, it was only a matter of time before the Hell they had escaped truly reinvented itself here—at least, it would if they didn't think of something soon—

Danny suddenly curled up more against Barns, startling him. He could hear her breathing, calm, but her body was tense.

"I want to stay here with you, so you don't wake up anymore," she whispered. It was too dark to see her eyes, but he knew she was looking at him.

"I..." Barns hesitated. He knew he had not been successful in hiding his night terrors, but he didn't want to worry anyone. They all had their problems to deal with; they didn't need his either.

"We might not be safer now, but we're still here together," Danny said. She tightened her arms around him, as if tethering him down to Earth, keeping him from floating away in foolish fears and nightmares.

He had always prided himself on knowing what to say and when to say it, especially when it came to difficult situations.

Lying there in misery and confusion, Barns didn't have much to say. He listened to Danny's words and let them guide him away from those thoughts, at least for now. She was right.

"...Thank you," he said. Danny snuggled closer and Barns sighed quietly as he closed his eyes.

For the first time in nearly three months, Barns slept in peace.

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End Chapter 28.
London has a headache and Vortex gets an even bigger one. Oh, hey, there, plot, where have you been? I'm excited, y'all.

A/Ns:
- The Decepticons targeted an oil refinery in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, which is operated by Rosneft OJSC. It isn't really on the Sea of Okhotsk, but it's pretty close.
- At the time of writing this chapter, neutrino particles have been recently suggested to be able to travel faster than light particles, photons, though it turns out it had been a faulty reading. Nevertheless, human science has also proposed that time travel would be possible through the use of light (photons), so here both particles are used in the process.
- And don't take everything WJ and Barns have deduced for granted. They missed something. Something very, very important.
Late October

Danny woke up to yelling. Not like when the base had been attacked; there weren't explosions, at least not near them. Still, the sound of soldiers yelling incoherent things was never a good sign. Her heart immediately flooded with fear and she found herself rolling out of bed to her feet at the same moment that she opened her eyes.

She wasn't the only one to react. She was the only human still sleeping; Vortex and Bluestreak were still with her at their camp. The helicopter had almost knocked over the small gas stove the soldiers had given them to heat their hangar after they had refused to move to the barracks when the weather turned cold. Bluestreak started to panic, but didn't say anything when Danny asked him hurriedly what was wrong. The shouting continued outside, and after Vortex and Bluestreak walked—not ran—outside to the source of the noise, Danny decided to follow them and find out.

Jazz and Thundercracker met them at the hangar bay door. Arcee had gone to collect Barns and Kass from the cafeteria and Wildrider came rushing up with Rachel in tow, she had apparently been in the bathroom.

"London just got bombed," Jazz said, calm, but his visor was bright. Kass gasped and Bluestreak made a whimpering sound. "It coulda been worse. Th' RAF managed t' pull through an' chase most of th' Seekers off, but they got hit somethin' awful."

Starscream had finally made his move. Or rather, the Decepticons.

The reports were still coming in, but the Autobots and NEST were all ready to fly out at a minute's notice. It made Danny nervous to hear them talking about perhaps rushing into combat. It was a long-time coming, yes, but she did not like the idea of seeing her friends go with them this time. Wildrider was all too eager to jump into the action; it made Danny feel ill.

Apparently they had struck without any chance for the British military to prepare. The Seekers moved in and just blew things up. People, buildings, whole streets—Danny had never visited England in their old world, since it had been so badly destroyed in the war by nuclear weapons, but she liked the pictures of it.
It was being destroyed again, Danny thought, grim.

She waited quietly with Bluestreak and Kass to hear more about what was happening. Barns had gone off to the computer lab to look things up on the Internet news sites, but Danny had wanted to hear it from the soldiers as they talked around them.

"They're saying that it wasn't too bad," Bluestreak told them, large hand almost-on Kass' back in reassurance. He was getting updates periodically from the officers via Jazz. "It doesn't appear they were targeting anything important. The Royal Family—I always thought you guys didn't have monar chies anymore, but I forgot about England, and Sweden and Belgium and Japan and—wow, there are a lot of monar chies! Anyhow the Royal Family and Parliament are fine. Uhhh, Jazz is saying that they hit the financial district and parts of Islington and Camden, but the RAF drove the Seekers away before they did much damage to Westminster. Oh—that's the Houses of Parliament."

"Thank goodness," Kass murmured. There was plenty of worry left in her eyes though.

Danny nervously waited to hear more, but she was already struggling to really accept what had happened. Clearly, this was either a show of power or a warning. Even if the Seekers hadn't been scared off, this was probably just a hit-and-run display to inspire fear, Jazz warned. Thundercracker agreed; this had been a prominent tactic during the beginning of their own war on the various city-states that had aligned with Prime.

"They're trying to intimidate the countries they think are the strongest threats," Thundercracker had explained. He had been a Seeker too, so his expertise was invaluable to Prowl and the other human tacticians right now. "It's the way Starscream likes to fight. Smaller strikes at increased frequency create the illusion of a larger enemy force. He'll use that illusion to panic the civilian population, to put pressure on their government to take action, quickly. It worked quite well on Altihex and Gygax."

"It's working here," one of the NEST soldiers muttered when he heard it, and Danny had to agree. The ghost-like presence of the Seekers as they appeared over major cities around the world, threatening action but not making any move to strike until now, made it seem like they were everywhere at once.

The uncertainty of the situation made the fear exponentially worse. Danny had endured lunch with her friends, forced to listen to the radio the soldiers had brought into the cafeteria. The attack was all over the news, the only thing anyone was talking about. Everyone was freaking out and Danny couldn't blame them. But now that the world was freaking out, Danny was worried that they'd be too scared. She worried that they'd lash out at the Autobots, or start rioting in the streets (there had already been one in Washington, D.C.).

Worst case scenario, Arcee had told them grimly, was that human leaders across the globe might cave in to the terror threats, or try to negotiate their way out of the situation by making deals with the Decepticons. That would be the worst thing to happen for sure; they weren't called Decepticons for no reason, Jazz snarked darkly. The countries would only end up hurting their people if they gave in and let the Decepticons take them over in exchange for peace. And the Decepticons would use those countries as a base of operations to support the war against everyone else.

Peace won by cowardice wasn't peace—it was just willing enslavement, Thundercracker said. It made Danny shiver. Galvatron wasn't trying to blast Earth into submission—yet; he was trying to bide his time and get the weakest of them to bow down to him first.

"I gotta go call my mom," Miles kept saying, mostly to Kass, because he seemed to really like her. Danny liked him well enough to feel comfortable with him following Kass around like a "love-sick
puppy," as Barns teased. "Kass, do you think Major Lennox'll let me call again? I haven't called anyone since they made me grab my stuff to stay over longer."

"I'm not sure. Perhaps," Kass replied, ever-patient. She was just as kind to Miles as she was to Bluestreak… who never failed to hover almost threateningly in the background when he could.

He did not like Miles. At all. At first, he'd laughed at Miles' jokes like the rest of them, but the moment it became clear that Miles was intent on hanging around Kass, let alone the rest of the survivors, that laughter died off quickly. He hadn't said anything _yet_, but he didn't have to. The Praxian wouldn't let them go off without him trailing behind, except when they ended up going to places like the cafeteria – and then he just sat outside and sulked until they came back out or someone chased him off. Danny felt bad for the young mech, who was obviously worried his closest friend was being stolen from him, but it was just something he'd have to adapt to.

"We should go bug Epps about it instead," Sam announced, having finally made it a habit to sit at their table every meal with Mikaela and Miles. Danny and her friends tolerated it, and after a while, she sort of liked talking with other young people instead of just her three usual friends. "I should probably go call my parents, too."

Mikaela agreed, citing the need to call her father, and the four of them decided to go, including Kass. The British woman wasn't replacing her friends, Danny knew, but it was still unsettling to see how close they were getting. Kass was "networking" according to Jazz, who was obviously very pleased about this new influx of "friends" for the humans to be around. Danny liked Sam, Mikaela and Miles well enough, but sometimes she had to sympathize with Wildrider and Bluestreak.

With that, Danny was alone again. Barns had disappeared back to the computer lab and Rachel had gone off to watch the soldiers in the exercise room train; she always hid behind her notebook, but she was really watching them train. Danny had a feeling her friend wanted to join them, if only to get some use out of her newly reacquired flight suit, but Rachel would just deny it. She was still fighting this world tooth and nail, unlike Kass, who was apparently accepting it.

Nearly all of their mech friends were either official or semi-Autobots, so they were always busy lately. Bluestreak, Arcee and Jazz had their sigils back and Thundercracker was in the process of technically enlisting, though he was more of a liaison at this point. Wildrider had made a fuss over getting a sigil, not wanting it to skive with his paint job ("_Little Kass should do it, she did stripes—you are not touching stripes!_"), but it was only a matter of time before he was an official soldier in their ranks.

Danny thought about just staying in their tiny encampment in Hangar B. They had actually made NEST remove the supplies from their container walls instead of moving the actual container units; Jazz was almost supernatural in his manipulation skills to get what the refugees wanted. That left them with a slightly cold and somewhat exposed living space, but it was more home than the barracks would be, she mused, where they would not have the mechs around them.

To her misfortune, Danny found out she wasn't entirely alone at the hangar, however, when she saw Jazz and Thundercracker walking by. They hadn't seen her walk in, curious, because they were talking with Prowl and the scary Autobot, Ironhide. Danny didn't like him at all, but the four of them had to work together to make the Autobot-NEST alliance work.

It was all too tempting to eavesdrop, but Danny knew that was sort of pointless, especially if they spoke on-and-off in Cybertronian. She had always begged Wheeljack to teach her the language, but she only knew some of the verbal sounds. It was all he could teach her, after all. The clicking, whirling and hissing inflections were obviously quite beyond her capability to create… 
Danny froze a dozen yards away from the bay door when she suddenly heard someone speak up who wasn't in her line of sight. Edging closer, Danny peered beyond Thundercracker's turned back and saw Vortex standing there. He looked angry and sounded like he was about to start punching things.

Uh…oh.

"Our hands are tied at the moment," Prowl replied shortly. "Hoist, Sideswipe and Trailbreaker will be going to London to help with reconstruction. There is a less than eighty-two percent chance that Starscream will attack Great Britain again soon—it is far more likely that he will choose to attack another of our allies, such as Canada, Germany, or Japan. However, if we travel to Britain en-masse we would attract the attention of our enemies, and we could become targets, raising the likelihood of attack to ninety-two percent."

Why Vortex was interested in talking to the Autobot leaders about London was a bit alarming to Danny, but she immediately dreaded moving closer to hear the conversation play out, because Vortex's anger only grew.

"Why the frag haven't they tracked the Seekers down?" the helicopter demanded, incredulous. "Have the humans learnt nothing?"

Ironhide made a growling sound and defended the humans with surprising vigor. "Humans aren't able to move quickly enough," he said irritably. "Our enemies have a mixture of speed and teleportation for some on their side, in case you forgot."

"Then send Thundercracker," Vortex shot back, rotors on his back twitching, threatening to send his propellers whirling dangerously. "Or me! We can fly faster than Earth vessels. We could hunt them down."

"And do what? Attack Galvatron or Starscream directly?" Prowl challenged, cutting Jazz off incidentally. Jazz's awkward expression didn't make Danny feel better. "Don't be foolish. We need to approach with the proper amount of force."

Vortex glared. "You're wasting us. We can do more than cart around supplies or show the organics how to kill mechs," he spat. "Your paranoia is making the situation worse."

"You wish to join the Autobots?" Prowl asked. Thundercracker suddenly averted his optics and Ironhide scoffed loudly.

As expected, Vortex only became more incensed. "Frag no!" he shouted. He held up his arm, seething. "You really think I need a fragging sigil in order to hold a gun?"

Prowl shared a quick glance with Jazz, who was unhelpfully quiet, probably trying to not take sides. "The President and Congress were clear: no Neutral mech will be allowed international travel nor combat alongside NEST forces," Prowl explained, deliberately slow. "We cannot risk upsetting our allies with unaligned aliens."

Danny cringed and fought the urge to back further into the hangar when she saw him throw his fist out in anger, arm propellers whirling loudly. His frustration was at its peak; he only ever got this upset when Bluestreak was really bothering him. Even then, this was… worse than normal.

"Fuck the politics!" Vortex yelled. He pointed at Prowl, the gesture vicious. "I will never join your damn army. Autobots shot at me more often than Decepticons ever did, even if it was Galvatron who
finally killed my brothers." The helicopter's glare turned even more poisonous as his visor narrowed to practically a slit. "I owe you nothing, especially not my allegiance."

Ironhide bristled and Jazz opened his mouth to say something, probably a plea for patience, but both relented when Prowl tilted his helm and returned Vortex's anger with pointed calmness. It was almost unnatural.

"Then I have nothing further to say about the matter," the Autobot tactician said, thoroughly un-intimidated. "The choice is yours, Vortex, but the options you have to choose from cannot be changed."

And that was end of it. Danny frowned sympathetically as Vortex physically drew back, both in anger and disbelief. Jazz shifted awkwardly and kept looking over at Thundercracker; both looked helpless. There was nothing they could do. Danny could almost understand, as much as she could of politics, why the humans feared third-party aliens jumping into the fray, but… it wasn't fair. Vortex didn't care about rules, or playing by them. All at once, his frustration peeled away into fury. Danny almost missed the danger, but she suddenly found herself looking at a battle brewing. Vortex had suddenly started to loom instead of moving back more; his entire body thrummed with invisible tension and aggression.

Oh… no, Danny thought, mind numb. Not again. Oh, Primus, no more fighting!

She wasn't the only one to sense it. Jazz immediately made a warning noise, perhaps a blip of Cybertronian or maybe just a squawk of alarm, but Ironhide's cannons abruptly hummed to life. Danny felt frozen as she heard the whining noise drift up to an audible level. She had hoped the noise would scare Vortex off too, but instead of moving away, Vortex's engine started to grow louder as he faced down the Autobots.

Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no—

For the first time since she had first met the black-and-white mech, Prowl's doorwings rose up slowly and stayed at mid-arch. She had never seen Bluestreak ever look that way, but judging by the accompanying cold look and the way Prowl was abruptly still, Danny knew it was a battle-ready posture, returning the one Vortex was demonstrating.

"Back down, Vortex," the tactician warned, voice slow and calm, negating the subtle glare he was wearing.

He probably could have moved mountains with that voice. Danny had never heard someone so calm and professional sound so dangerous… so threatening. No wonder he was their leader now.

Apparently, Vortex didn't care about mountains moving or professionalism. For a second, Danny thought he'd back down.

And then suddenly, he moved forward, far more quickly than Danny had ever seen him move before. Jazz and Ironhide shouted, and Prowl ducked down physically, tucking in his doorwings, bracing himself for the confrontation. He didn't budge, not even when Vortex was almost on him with his propellers whirling—

"VORTEX!"

Before the helicopter could touch Prowl, Thundercracker was between them. Thundercracker grabbed Vortex by the shoulder and forced him back, leaving Prowl staring up at him in shock.
Thundercracker pointedly ignored the tactician and fixed the seething helicopter with a fierce look after spinning him around, away from the Autobots.

"Enough," he snarled. Danny grimaced; why the anger? Wasn't there enough of that already? Why did they have to keep fighting?

Vortex growled openly and tried to get around the jet. Thundercracker didn't move and shoved the helicopter away from Prowl again. It only pushed him a few feet away instead of hurting him, but it only made Vortex angrier. Jazz immediately warbled something in Cybertronian and Vortex snarled back, Ironhide joining in. All of them were facing off against Vortex and Danny suddenly felt immediately alarmed.

"Stop it!" she shouted, causing Jazz to literally jump. Vortex whirled around and saw her, visor burning brightly. Danny took a step forward, but then stopped when she saw Ironhide just waiting there. "J-just calm down, Vortex, please!"

Vortex made a move, as if to step toward her, and went to speak behind his mask. Danny never once thought in that moment that he'd hurt her. He was Vortex. Vortex. He was a brother to her, just like Wildrider and Bluestreak were. He had saved her life so many times… she trusted him like she trusted any of her alien friends.

But things had changed. Not for Vortex and not for Danny. They had changed because of this awful new world.

Without a word, Thundercracker placed himself between Danny and Vortex with a single step.

And then… Danny felt everything stop. She stared at the expansive back of the Seeker in front of her and then peered out past him, where she could see Vortex looking at Thundercracker.

He just stared at him.

Somewhere, in the depths of his green visor, something akin to hurt flashed in Vortex's optics. Danny couldn't breathe, let alone speak. It was unnecessary. It was unnecessary.

Without another word, Vortex stumbled away from Thundercracker, ignoring Jazz, who had stepped closer in worry. None of the mechs made a noise as they watched Vortex with varying degrees of concern and fierce aggression.

Vortex transformed. It had been a long time since Danny had seen the mech tear up into the air, shifting his body until he was no longer humanoid, but rather a dark gray helicopter. She ducked at the gust of wind that was expelled by his transformation, so she couldn't see him take off. Dodging past Thundercracker, Danny watched as Vortex flew away from them, toward the edge of the base.

He reached the edge of the forest, and only then did their group realize what had just happened.

"Where does he think he's going?" Ironhide demanded, stepping forward with charging canons as if he was about to go after Vortex. Danny felt even more lightheaded.

"He just comm'd me," Jazz said, voice tight. "He's just gonna go to the forest t' cool off."

Ironhide's engines made a sharp sound. "I'm going to—!"

"No. Let him go," Prowl said shortly, sending Ironhide an unreadable look. "We cannot be fighting each other when we need to be concerned with fighting our real enemies."
Shocked into speechlessness, Danny just watched as the Autobots turned away. Jazz and Thundercracker seemed to have a fierce internal conversation, because Thundercracker abruptly looked upset and Jazz covered his faceplates with his claws. They stood there for a moment before finally turning and looking down at Danny. She stared back, unable to say anything.

"You okay, Danny?" Jazz asked, concerned.

For the life of her, she wanted to slap him. "...You didn't... have to chase him off," she said, voice wavering. She stared at Thundercracker, still bewildered. "Why did you do that?"

Thundercracker didn't seem to know either. "I..." he began, failing. "He was becoming too aggressive. I didn't want to risk him lashing out, even by accident."

"But he's never hurt us!" Danny cried. She wondered if she looked just as wretched as the jet did now. Her heart ached. "You guys acted like he wasn't our friend anymore! That wasn't fair!"

Vortex was just scared and frustrated, like Danny felt, like she was sure the rest of them felt too. He didn't want to be an Autobot, but that didn't mean he was evil. Danny glared up at the two giants in front of her, unafraid, because just like Vortex, she knew Thundercracker and Jazz. They were just scared, too—but they knew what was right.

It didn't take long. Both mechs exchanged another look, full of guilt and discomfort.

"...I will apologize. I went too far," Thundercracker finally said, grim. Jazz nodded in agreement.

What good would an apology do? Danny looked back out at the distant forest, heartbroken. She wanted to go find Vortex, but maybe he didn't want to deal with anyone now. He was probably feeling hurt and betrayed; she certainly would. She didn't go after him because she knew he'd want the time to just... be alone.

She pointedly turned her back on Jazz and Thundercracker and wandered back to the front of the hangar. She settled down on the cement and stared out at the forest. She'd wait for him to come back. It was... the least she could offer him.

Danny peered up at the dimming sky. She wondered if Wheeljack was looking back at her.

"We could really use you right now, 'Jack," she said quietly. She could, at least, to keep her strong.

Because day by day... it was getting harder to be just that.

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Rushing back from the computer lab, Barns tried not to panic as he sought out any familiar face in the crowd. While he had gotten better at recognizing the men and women of NEST, he cared only about finding his friends.

Unsurprisingly, only Danny was waiting by Hangar B's entrance. She was sitting down and waved at him glumly. That was not encouraging, not with all the worries he had floating around in his mind.

This was very, very bad.

"Where did Vortex go?" he asked the moment he was closer to her. He had heard all the soldiers talking excitedly and they kept mentioning the helicopter and how he had flown off.

"Out to the woods. He... got freaked and wanted out," Danny said. She shrugged, looking
miserable. "He wants to help so bad."

Barns frowned, understanding. He glanced outside and saw Jazz and Thundercracker talking as they left Prowl and the other Autobots in the communications center. They seemed concerned, but not overly worried.

"He'll be okay. Maybe the fresh air will help," Barns said, turning back around. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder as he sat down with her, facing the far off forest. "We could all use some time out in the forest. Just for a walk." All he knew were metal walls and cement floor anymore. He missed grass.

"I don't want to go anywhere off base," she replied, frowning even more. "Not with the drones MIA."

"It'd be just like home," Barns murmured, sarcastic. Danny snorted and just shook her head as she burrowed deeper into her NEST-donated winter jacket.

It was nerve-wracking to let any of their friends go off alone, but Vortex needed it. He needed to blow off steam, especially since it had been building up for all of them this entire time. Barns wondered if he could just… disappear for a day. He was never fond of weapons, but the idea of just letting go was so very enticing.

"Have you heard anything from Jazz?" Danny asked suddenly.

"About what?" Barns asked, eyebrows arched.

Danny shrugged. "Anything. I mean, I'd ask him and TC directly, but I don't think they want to talk about scary stuff like the drones," she said. "You said they were gonna talk about it all soon, make a plan, so I was wondering if you had heard anything."

"Why would they talk to me and not you?" Barns asked, bemused as they snuggled closer against a gust of wind. It was getting cold enough out that the heat was on. It was still chillier inside their exposed hangar than inside the barracks, but this was the only place they could fit everyone. They could handle the cold; they always had before.

The brown haired woman sent him a strained look. "You're the smart one," she said, cutting off his denial with a shake of her head. "Besides, you were talking with him about it before. I was just wondering if he talked to you about it afterwards."

Him. WJ. Barns nodded, distracted again by her inability to say the name. She had to get over that, though he wasn't going to pressure her.

"He just relayed the information about the scientists from what I last heard," Barns replied carefully. That had been a few days ago; he assumed the Autobots had already discussed things since Jazz had talked to the rest of their group earlier. It wasn't really Barns' business after that.

Danny's lips twisted into a frown. "Oh… well…" she trailed off. She looked up at him with dark, worried eyes. "Do you think they're even still looking?"

Barns was surprised by that. "Yes, of course." Why wouldn't they?

The frustrated huff that came from the small woman made him smile. "I can't believe there's nothing out there though," she said, complaining. She clung to him anyway. "No evidence? No sightings?"

"It's difficult to believe for me, too," he murmured, embracing her lightly.
How could the drones not have been spotted by now? The metaphorical check-list they had created was rather straightforward: the Fallen had shown up and then disappeared, then Galvatron had somehow come back to life, and now the Decepticons had started their attacks. The logical next step was the drones… who were no where to be found.

They were here though. Somewhere. Barns could just feel it. Now more than ever.

London was the first strike. It had to be. It was the tipping point for the war and Barns didn't have to be a strategist to understand that. With the advent of the Decepticons making their mark as a true terror threat, the war was no longer about waiting for the first strike. It was about waiting for the next and the next and the next.

And that meant… the drones were ready. Or at least, Galvatron had finally gotten them to Earth. There was no way he'd risk his newly reassembled army now if he didn't have his aces at the ready.

…but where were they?!

"They have to be here," he said quietly, knowing Danny understood. He stared down at the asphalt beyond them, mind racing suddenly.

It was there. The information had to be there, somewhere, in all of their data and scans. Maybe it was simply because they hadn't seen the larger picture—or maybe it was a smaller one. Prowl and the Americans were working nonstop at analyzing all the information they could get their hands on, but Prowl was also distracted by his job as head Autobot now. Maybe it was just a simple case of missing something.

He thought of WJ. If anyone could help them narrow things down, perhaps it was the scientist. They needed more of them, Barns thought, more than they needed warriors. This war would be won or lost as much by understanding the logic behind their enemies' actions as it would by having the ability to tear them apart.

What were they missing?

Barns was just a human, a civilian technically. He wanted to help just as desperately as Vortex did, but at least Vortex would be able to help fight in a battle. Even though the Autobots had given them back their weapons, Barns knew a grenade and a concussion blaster would do very little to a Decepticon. Barns felt incredibly useless sitting there with so few options. He hadn't done anything to help, save point out the inconsistencies with the time travelers, but even then—

Barns froze.

…all he had done… was…

Lifting his head slowly, Barns peered out at empty space, eyes growing wider.

He saw green lights, like stars, dancing across black maps, meaning something that was constantly eluding his mind—

Breath strangled in his throat, Barns sat up straight. Danny had been rudely yanked out of her own thoughts by Barns' movement, but Barns wasn't thinking about what was around him.

"Oh, my God," he said, heart pounding.

"Barns?" Danny asked, startled as she looked up at him. "What's wrong?"
"The drones," Barns said, still choked. He stared out at nothing, heart racing, his mind racing even faster.

The drones.

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He wanted to set the whole damn place on fire. Every tree, every shrub, every last remaining vestige of green in the area—he wanted to see it burn.

Vortex landed harshly among the dying trees and grass in the forest. It was almost comforting to see brown instead of green, especially the patches that lingered throughout the park. The dead plants reminded him of home; how pathetic.

He had been surprised that the Autobots had let him leave, especially in the air, but then again, perhaps it wasn't too surprising. All tempers were running high lately. Maybe they just didn't think it was worth trying to keep any of them there.

That didn't make Vortex's anger diminish in the slightest. He brought his leg up and kicked the nearest tree—a strong oak—straight out of the ground. His strength was back now that he was properly fueled. He had the strength to rip through the forest and tear down even more trees, enjoying every snap and shuddering thud as the forest presented opportunity after opportunity to express his rage.

He hated this place.

He hated what it was doing, to him and to the few creatures left he felt anything about.

The last pine broke down two smaller saplings and Vortex found himself opening fire on the fallen trunks. They splintered and he only stopped after he realized he was firing at open air. The forest echoed from the continuous gunfire.

After what seemed like hours, he stopped. Back propellers twitching, Vortex edged away from the trees. He looked upwards at the tiny portion of the sky he could see. Dusk approached. The hissing of his engine and whining of his abused hydraulics were the only thing he could hear.

He hated himself.

He could just hear Barns' tsking, Kass' sad sigh, or Danny's fierce denial. He could see Jazz's disapproving frown, Bluestreak's pout, and Wildrider's poorly imitated eye-roll.

He could just imagine Wheeljack shaking his helm gently and saying, "Nonsense."

But it wasn't nonsense. Vortex force himself to stay still, even as his clenched fists shook. Thundercracker's unnecessary defense of Danny had been crippling. He had only moved toward her to demand her opinion on the matter, since the humans' opinions would always matter over his. Had Vortex become so unworthy that all of the trust they had built as a unit just… disappeared overnight?

What the frag could he do to prove himself? He had nothing. Nothing. He was no soldier, no Autobot grunt. He could shoot and kill his enemies, who just so happened to be Decepticons now, but what would that do? He had to wait—uselessly—until the war finally came to claim them.

He wanted to go out. He wanted to hunt Galvatron and his pets, find them, rip them down to spare parts. He'd destroy anything that threatened them now—the Decepticons, the drones, the Fallen. He'd destroy them all.
Until then—

Nothing. Vortex sank his fingers into the bark of the tree nearest to him, shivering with rage. Part of it was at Galvatron. The other… was at himself.

How could he possibly do anything for his family like this? How could he go back there to face them after running off?

Rachel… was there. She was probably worried. And angry. But never angry enough. She never turned him away or blamed him—for anything. His faults, his failures… she accepted them.

**Why?**

Growling lowly, Vortex tried to cut his anger off before it exploded into violence again. He had to be rational. Calm. And patient. The war would come to them one way or the other.

He just… hated the wait. It was breaking him down from the inside out.

"I will kill you," Vortex hissed into the air. He could only wish Galvatron would hear him. If only they knew where the fragging monster was.

Perhaps then… it wouldn't matter if he was an official Autobot soldier or not. He didn't care if they sent him in alone, or in at all. He'd go anyway, with or without their slagging permission.

He'd finish the war his brothers, Goddard, and Wheeljack had died for.

He knew it was time to go back. It was already getting close to sundown. This place still unnerved him, despite spending so much time in abandoned Europe, which was even more still and quiet than this.

Vortex managed to turn around and look back toward the base. He could see, with his advanced heat sensors, the base's lights and various humanoid figures moving across the airfield. He was less than three klicks away.

But apparently, that wasn't close enough.

The wind shifted. Unnaturally. Vortex trained his sensors away from the base. He didn't have the chance to be properly alarmed.

He froze, his sensors picking up movement behind him. Vortex turned around immediately. It wasn't because he was surprised; for a moment, his spark twisted with fear.  

**Decepticons.**

Vortex had enough time to see a hulking mech touch down in front of him before he felt a second mech appear behind him. They moved like phantoms, their signatures blocked from radar with almost supernatural prowess. A bright red visor blazed down on the significantly dwarfed helicopter.

"Hello, Vortex."

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*End Chapter 29.*
Chapter End Notes

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Sometimes, Jazz hated being himself. He might not have believed in regrets, but he certainly hated having to deal with his own fuck-ups. It wasn't even Rachel this time, though he was still wondering when the frag he'd be able to patch things up with her. No, now he was dealing with yet another mistake he had made in the attempt to protect the family he had been given responsibility over.

Prowl had aptly called him to the command center and Jazz didn't even need to be told what it was about. Jazz had overheard some of the humans on base complain that they couldn't tell if Prowl had emotions or not. For Jazz, having megavorns of experience with this particular Praxian, Prowl's guilt was all too apparent on his faceplates when he looked up at Jazz.

"Vortex just touched down by the front gate," Prowl announced before Jazz could say anything. "Arcce says he's calm."

Jazz wilted. "Thank Primus," he muttered, processors already trying to figure out what to do with that bit of information. The communication lines were clear of any drama, but he couldn't bring himself to believe that this would be the end of the matter. Vortex had been torqued when he left, and rightly so. Jazz expected him to brood over this for quite a while, even after the apologies had been issued and accepted. "Does she need help with him?"

Prowl shook his helm. "No, I don't believe so. He's speaking rationally with Ironhide as well," he said, obviously communicating with the security officer. He frowned slightly as he took Jazz in, who was just standing there by the door. "You don't wish to greet him?"

Honestly, Jazz wanted to run back out to the field and make sure Vortex was alright and not still ready to get himself slagged at the hands of the other Autobots, but if he was calm… Jazz forced himself to stay where he was.

"I don't think he's gonna wanna see me or TC just yet… I…" he began, hesitating. He grimaced a smile at Prowl, spark filled with his own guilt. "I promised not t' take sides, but I guess not sayin'
anythin' is even worse, right?"

Vortex was never going to accept living or working with Autobots as an Autobot. Jazz knew better than to accept that. He just wished… he could provide some sort of compromise for his friend. Vortex deserved better than suspicion and paranoia. Jazz had failed him by not trying harder to get them to cooperate, or at least by standing up for him. This division was not what their family needed, period.

"You did what you had to, Jazz," Prowl replied, surprising the saboteur. "It was my fault, that he was so upset. I take responsibility for this. I intend to apologize once he finds it acceptable for me to approach him as well."

Jazz nodded, still feeling uncomfortable with the whole thing.

::Is he really okay?:: he asked Arcee over a private link.

There was a short pause, but when she finally spoke up over the comm. she seemed pleased. ::He's just quiet.:: she replied, sounding relieved. ::We should be grateful. I think he'll be okay, Jazz. He needed the time alone. Just take it slow when you do approach him.::

He intended to do just that. He did not want to chase his family away. Even if the war was over, he wouldn't want to drive a wedge between them. With no idea of where Starscream, Galvatron or the drones were it was an even worse concept. He didn't trust this world, no matter how much better it was in terms of safety. Vortex should have felt safe to be here, with them, and Jazz was going to do his best to make sure that was true.

"'Tex is fine. Grumpy, but he's still a good guy," he said after a while, looking up at Prowl, who patiently waited for him. "We'll get over this."

Prowl tilted his head. "You continue to claim that," he said, almost amused. "For all of you."

Jazz had to give a half-hearted grin at that. "It's like our motto, or somethin'. It works." It kept them sane, if anything. He wondered if any of them actually believed it, or if it was just a reminder for them to stop complaining and keep their heads.

"Hmm… I suppose we can all learn to emulate that approach to life," Prowl said. He then did an about-face with his attention, which was oh-so Prowl-like. "That said, I would like to discuss our plans for moving Ironhide's squad to Diego Garcia…"

Bemused, Jazz listened to the tactician speak about his various future plans for the NEST teams. Prowl clearly worried for them all, including Vortex, but never allowed that concern to distract him from his job, rather it kept him focused on doing his best. It was a relief to be able to trust that whatever Prowl did, he kept the big picture in mind; sometimes Jazz doubted his own ability to juggle his family obligations with the duties of this "new" war.

Jazz had also been surprised to realize that Prowl had, within just a few short weeks of his "re-enlistment," started bouncing ideas off of him. It wasn't something that was new to Jazz—he had spent probably vorns over the course of the war listening in silence to his Prowl talk about tactical plans, possible strategies and likely outcomes. Occasionally Prowl had looked for ideas, input on ways to improve a plan he wasn't satisfied with, but usually Jazz's role had been to critique plans that seemed faulty in some way. That was a rare thing, since Prowl's processors had been designed specifically to allow him to calculate the odds for hundreds of thousands, even millions, of possible outcomes. The few times his calculations had been wrong were attributed to faulty data or a lack of information, which he'd tried to remedy by referencing the knowledge and experience of the other
officers, especially Jazz.

But that had been his Prowl, a Prowl he'd known for over ten vorns before the mech had asked for his input on anything more significant than when and where to have their daily energon ration.

Jazz had been taken aback by how easily this Prowl fell into the same habit. It both pleased and distressed him to realize that Prowl obviously felt comfortable enough with him to fall into a routine like that with a mech they both agreed was not the same as the one he had known. According to the rules, which Prowl rarely deviated from, Mirage should be performing this function instead, since he was the head of Special-Ops now. Jazz was barely a junior intelligence officer.

The saboteur had to wonder if Prowl even recognized what he was doing.

Prowl went on about how Russia, England and the U.N. at large were finally working with NEST cohesively. It was a huge step forward, especially compared to Jazz's world's history, where Earth's leading countries had gotten along rather poorly under the pressure of intergalactic war. Here they were making headway by keeping each other informed and maintaining alliances. Not to mention the Hyperion was ever closer to Earth.

Perhaps… things were getting better, Jazz reasoned as he listened half-heartedly. They may have lost Prime, but maybe that didn't matter…

The sudden lack of dialogue made Jazz refocus his visor on Prowl's faceplates. The tactician was staring back at Jazz, who belatedly realized he had been staring at Prowl with a probably blank expression for the entirety of the one-sided conversation.

"…What?" Prowl asked at length, optics narrowed slightly.

Jazz hesitated under the attention. He could have said a lot of things. One thing came to mind all too readily.

"You look good in black an' white," he said with a shameless grin. Prowl froze, but Jazz simply shrugged. "I never saw ya on Earth. Always wondered if I had, what ya'd look like, what form ya'd take."

Prowl seemed taken back by that response, though he recovered quickly. "Yes. Optimus was wise to suggest I take on the visage of the human police force," he said. He paused, and if he were a lesser mech, probably would have tried to imitate the human eye roll. "The twins would agree I am just as strict."

Jazz had to laugh at that. "Nah, yer just… Prowl," he said, shrugging again. That sort of just summed it up in Jazz's mind.

Of course, he had to ruin it. He wanted to be friends with the Autobot officer, because Prowl was a good mech. He was a good friend and commander. But Jazz wasn't. Jazz just fucked things up.

He watched the doorwings shiver in quiet laughter. He couldn't tear his optics away when Prowl's shoulders rolled slightly, the light catching on the black and white armor.

When he lifted his helm and found himself staring directly into Prowl's optics, he couldn't tear his gaze away. He was pinned by something he was one hundred percent sure wasn't supposed to be there anymore.

Jazz stared, until he was certain his spark chamber had nearly stopped pulsing. The only reason he knew he hadn't suddenly offlined was because his spark flared in frigid fear. Of what, he wasn't sure.
"...I should go," he said lowly, already ducking back slightly.

Prowl's left doorwing twitched. "Yes," he said, his voice rough.

Jazz didn't even nod; he turned and did his best not to run out the door. He nimbly dodged Mirage and Hound, who were entering the command center, ignoring Hound's question of what was wrong.

Nothing was wrong, Jazz decided, because he refused to let it be wrong.

::Hey, TC?::

::Yes?:: his mate answered almost immediately. It was a painful thing, that reassurance that he was still there.

::::Nothin'. Just checking up on ya.:::

::You should come see what I'm doing.::

Jazz immediately honed in on the jet. ::Sure thing:::

Anything at all, to leave that room and its occupant far, far behind him.

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Things weren't right, not on a lot of levels, and Thundercracker felt frustrated by his inability to fix them. Barns had suddenly alienated himself from the rest of them, including Danny, to spend time looking over lists of data retrieved from Jazz that he really couldn't understand. He refused to speak about it either. Kass was having issues with handling both her new friendship with the Autobots' civilians and their group of ten, especially Bluestreak. Danny was trying very hard to appear useful by being prepared, but that wasn't getting her anywhere.

Rachel… Rachel was still ignoring Jazz. It pained Thundercracker to see his inner family quarreling and to see Jazz so torn up about it, but at least they weren't literally arguing anymore. It would play out eventually and Rachel would resume speaking to both of them normally in time.

That didn't even begin to cover the mech problems, either. Vortex had finally come back, but Thundercracker pointedly avoided going to speak with him to apologize until he was sure the helicopter wasn't still angry. Apparently, he wasn't and even Ironhide had been impressed by how calm the ex-Decepticon was. That said, the thought of apologizing to Vortex was still nerve-wracking. Thundercracker had rarely found the need to apologize for anything in his life, but he understood his actions in this case warranted a real apology.

His internal debates didn't matter right now, because Ironhide and Lennox had demanded that Vortex sit through a debriefing now that he'd returned. It was almost a disciplinary time-out, similar to what Lennox would have done with his daughter when she threw a tantrum, but it provided a chance for them to talk with Vortex while he was calm, hopefully without inducing another freak-out. Since Vortex was very composed and even somewhat respectful, there seemed to be no need to involve the humans just yet. Thundercracker was wary about not telling Rachel about the helicopter's return, but he agreed with Jazz to keep quiet about it.

Besides that drama, things were still tense. The rest of the mechs had signed up with the Autobots finally, even though Thundercracker was waiting for Wildrider to lash out in frustration, or for one of the actual Autobots to lash out at them. It was an uncomfortable lull between Seeker strikes.

So, Thundercracker decided to do his job as a creator and leader, instead of focusing on how he and
the others could play nice with other factions that day. He wasn't going to lose his family's stability when he had the power to at least try to fix things. Rachel and Jazz meant more to him than anything and their ability to be friendly with each other affected him more than making sure he was doing the inane jobs the Autobots had assigned him.

However, as Thundercracker plotted, he realized that one of his jobs had the potential to do more than pass time or make himself useful. He could use it to make Rachel feel better, and perhaps that would lead her to a reconciliation with Jazz.

The source of her problems had been Jazz seemingly forcing all of them to work for or at least with NEST. Quite like Vortex, Rachel had rejected the notion of trying to help any group specifically.

Maybe… she just needed to see how useful even one organic could be. Specifically how useful she was in the light of things.

Early in the morning, Thundercracker had sent Bluestreak, who had been rushing around doing errands, to go tell Rachel to meet him in back of Hangar C. Over the past few weeks, Rachel had fallen into a routine – she had breakfast with the other humans, then when Kass and Danny went to the med bay, she would take her notebook and either go watch the soldiers train (from a distance, of course) or she would simply hiding in their camp and write. She rarely interacted with anyone outside their own group, though occasionally she would speak with Mikaela, Sam, or Miles. The alienation was not healthy and it had to stop.

Rachel surprisingly came when called and showed up about half an hour later, right on time for Thundercracker's schedule. She didn't have her notebook with her, but the defensive posture and scowl told Thundercracker she would probably not hesitate to run away if this was a forced meeting with Jazz.

It wasn't. The saboteur wasn't even around, not yet at any rate. The only people nearby were a group of soldiers waiting for Thundercracker to start training them. He'd spent several weeks talking with them about how Seekers operated, showing them how they moved in the air, how they could transform to change position more quickly. But now it was time to move past fighting Decepticons.

Today… Thundercracker was going to teach them how to fight the drones, and the opportunity was too good to pass up.

"What did you call me here for?" Rachel demanded as she stopped short of him. She looked as irritable as she sounded, especially when her eyes trailed over and saw the soldiers at a distance. She almost seemed to draw back further into herself.

Thundercracker crouched and held his hand out to her, keeping her from literally moving backwards. "Rachel…" He considered how to go about saying it. He nodded over to the soldiers, who seemed unaware they were being watched. "They need to learn how to fight the drones."

Rachel's glower turned up toward him. "You show them then," she said stiffly.

"I'm a little big for that, don't you think?" he asked dryly. He stood up slowly and motioned toward the humans, his intentions obvious. "Walk with me."

He produced a bag from his sub-space, taken earlier that morning from their camp without Rachel noticing. It was a black duffel bag filled with several items that had passed NEST's decontamination process: his flight suit. Rachel recognized the bag and immediately reacted when he held it out to her to grab.
A series of emotions flashed over her face. Anger, fear, paranoia, hurt—none of them logical in this situation, but Rachel's emotions were hardly logical most times. "TC..." she started to say, but he cut her off.

"Now," he said, in a voice he had rarely used since she was a younger teen. It was his "dad" voice according to Rachel and Wheeljack, but no matter how ridiculous the concept behind it was, it worked.

Rachel scowled, but with only a few grumbles, she grabbed the bag from him. She fell in step with the Seeker as they walked toward the humans, who were more interested in watching Thundercracker than the human next to him. There was a truck nearby with a few soldiers leaning on it and one was sitting inside the bed, but Thundercracker was more interested in the crowd standing in front of the ammo box, one of whom was a very familiar face at this point.

"Uhh, what's up, Tiny?" Epps asked, eyebrows going up once the two came close and stopped a few yards away. Thundercracker rumbled lowly at the stupid nickname, but he supposed it was an improvement over the way the humans had cowered from him in the beginning of these training sessions.

"This is Rachel Cooper," the jet replied, motioning at the woman at his side, just in case any of the soldiers forgot. Rachel remained quiet, so Thundercracker supplied, "She is going to teach you in my stead."

No one moved at first. Epps seemed startled by his declaration, but none of the soldiers protested. They were too surprised, perhaps. Rachel took their silence impatiently and, without a word herself, marched forward with her bag. Thundercracker watched cautiously to see what she would do next.

"What—?" the brown haired Caucasian one—Lieutenant Walter Kane, if Thundercracker's records were correct—started to ask.

"Move aside," Rachel said shortly. She hauled the dark duffel bag over her shoulder more and stomped past the group of soldiers, who backed up in surprise.

"What are you doin'?" Epps asked, baffled by her behavior.

Turning around after reaching approximately the middle of the group, Rachel scowled back at him. "Every time you train, you make the same mistake. You all act like you're gonna be fighting something on land," she said, ignoring his flinch at her statement. "The drones fly."

Kane frowned. "He said they hovered," he said, waving his hand vaguely at Thundercracker and sounding confused more than accusatory. Several of his friends nodded in affirmation.

"They fly, hover, whatever!" Rachel snapped, throwing her hands up. She glared at the soldiers, undaunted by the fact that most of them were taller by several inches. "Point is, you have to be thinking about the airspace above you, not just focusing on what's at eye-level. The drones're capable of flying hundreds, if not thousands of feet, into the air. They chased down jets, after all."

The soldier on the truck bed arched an eyebrow. "You kill any?"

Rachel hesitated. "Yes," she said with a shrug. "Not as many as TC or the other mechs, but all humans learn very fast in our world how to kill these things."

Without pause, Rachel kicked one of the remaining ammo crates to the side, sliding it past bemused soldiers. She hauled the flight suit bag over and put it in front of her. Thundercracker watched silently, both to support Rachel but also to make sure she wasn't discouraged by the remaining
soldiers who were still frowning. Rachel turned to face her audience once she had a clear circle and seemed to brace herself.

"Basic information: you shoot out the limbs first to make it disoriented and reduce the chances that it slice you early in the engagement. If you're lucky, you might take out the optic," she said, making a circle gesture in the air in an approximate size example. "The optic is reinforced though, so don't expect a kill shot. If you don't get it in one hit and you don't have a distraction planned, you're as good as dead."

"Kinda like a bear," Epps quipped, bemused. Thundercracker paused; if only the human knew…

Rachel sent the officer a strained smile. "Only this bear flies, has serrated limbs sharp enough to cut through mech armor in seconds, and has laser weapons on the front. Oh, and they swarm like fucking killer bees," she said, without missing a beat. She let that sink in for the soldiers, who some of them looked decently uneasy now. "I'd describe what happens when they decide to take on a human, but I think you'd get a better example by staring at fruit in a high-speed blender."

Rachel was only able to make the analogy because she had recently seen a blender in action for the first time. For the humans among them, however, the analogy was probably very clear from their longer experience with human technology. Their nervous stares and shuffling were appreciated. They needed to take this seriously.

Rachel seemed to be observing their reactions carefully as well. "You want me to teach you how to kill these things?" she asked finally, sounding exasperated. She was still standing there waiting, however, and Thundercracker could see the tension in her frame was coming from fear of rejection. He waited, hoping.

Epps exchanged glances with his comrades, but he didn't seem to disagree with her presence. If anything, he seemed a little more relaxed than before, when Prowl had assigned Thundercracker to this job. Perhaps having a human trainer would be easier just by default.

"…Yeah," Epps said after a beat, looking back over at Rachel. He nodded sagely. "That'd be a help."

"…Fine." She stepped backwards and then crouched by her duffel bag at her feet. "I'll be the drone."

Rachel stared at him, eyes fierce. "What?" Kane asked, startled. He was even more surprised, like the others were, when Rachel suddenly started to take her flight suit out of the bag. The soldiers gawked at the obviously alien equipment that Rachel was comfortable with. "What the hell is all that?"

"A flight suit," Rachel replied shortly. She smirked, though, adding, "The drones fly."

If they didn't get that through their skulls in time, they wouldn't survive. Thundercracker knew it and so did the rest of his family. The soldiers and the rest of this world were still new to the Transformer war, especially the drones, but that would not save them. They needed to understand their enemies before it was too late.

After the initial shock over Rachel demonstrating the flight suit passed, the soldiers paid rapt attention as she explained stiffly how it worked and how she'd be flying. She showed them where on her body would be a good place to hit a drone, had it been there instead of her. Thundercracker watched them and felt pleased. This had worked.

::You should see what I'm doing…::
Thundercracker caught Jazz smiling at him from a distance, as they watched Rachel show the soldiers the drones' basic flight pattern. The saboteur didn't move closer and seemed content to watch.

::Good work, dad.:: Jazz teased.

The Seeker smirked and just nodded. ::Baby steps::. 0000

Kass was grateful for many things that had happened recently, though a lot of what had happened was terrible; London came to mind readily. But she and her family were still alive and safe, which was her top concern. Vortex's flight and Thundercracker's guilt were issues to work through certainly, but it could be worse. Far, far worse.

She was particularly grateful for a change in her more immediate well-being. She no longer felt so alienated in this world, well… she felt less alienated, at least. She was beginning to remember soldiers' names as she passed them in the hallway when she went to her training with Ratchet. She felt comfortable addressing Bumblebee by name and speaking to him directly when needed. He and Bluestreak could become excellent friends, she thought, hoping that once things calmed down for the Autobots, they could really get to know each other.

More than anything, Kass was pleased to know she had made her family's first real steps toward making an alliance with the other civilians on the base. Sam Witwicky had tried very hard to make them feel comfortable and so far, it had really only worked for Kass, but she was happy to get to know him. Mikaela was very kind as well and Kass was relieved to be able to talk to another woman besides Rachel and Danny about things. Both were outstandingly friendly and Kass had high hopes that they could win her other friends over soon, too. They'd be great allies to have in a world like this.

And then, of course, there was Miles Lancaster. At first alarmed by how forward the younger man was, Kass had been won over by Miles' apparent disregard for any judgmental behavior. He accepted things faster and more openly than Kass had ever seen someone do before. He didn't care that there were ex-Decepticons in their midst (well, to be fair, he had never witnessed an attack by one either) and he sure didn't mind that Kass preferred to take things slow. He didn't tease her or make her do things she didn't want to do. He was just encouraging and a talker. Kass was certainly used to that.

It was baffling at first why Miles was even on the base, however. He had seen Bumblebee transform nearly two months ago, well before the rest of the world had seen videos and interviews with other Autobots. He'd told Kass that he was here because they were afraid he'd talk, and while that might have been true in the beginning, by now almost everyone with access to the internet had seen video clips of the Decepticons in action. The recent London attack had spawned thousands of new, longer video clips of the attack.

Miles knowing the Autobots personally might have been important, though. He knew their names, who was there, who did what—all through the circumstance of being on base around them. He was a talker, too. Kass knew he wouldn't go blabbing to a talk show at the drop of the hat, but he probably wouldn't be able to considering no one would probably take him seriously anyway.

Plus… Kass wasn't ignorant to the way Lennox would sometimes come by and inspect their acquaintanceship. He kept an eye on Miles when he was speaking with Kass and the others who would listen to him for the same reason he'd done the same with Sam and Mikaela. He was trying to see if their attempt at diplomacy was working. Maybe it was, but Kass knew Lennox probably
valued the teenagers as a way to bridge the gap between NEST and the survivors.

It was odd to know that NEST was equating Miles' friendship (because he was certainly not aiming to gain anyone's trust for the sake of politics, that was clear enough) in terms of political usefulness, but it really didn't affect Kass in the end, or her friends. Miles was perfectly happy operating as though he was just making new friends. He probably didn't even know about Optimus Prime's last request to Sam. Even if he did… Kass knew Miles would just do it to be nice.

That was why Kass felt comfortable allowing Miles to get close, sharing jokes at the table or dragging her off to go spend time with Sam, Mikaela and Bumblebee. They told her about the "real world" and all the things she had always considered a part of history, like music concerts, high school, college applications and mowing grass lawns. It was informative and… comforting. She felt accepted.

She just wished her other friends and family could be that accepting too. Rachel was still sulking, going on for the fourth week now with uncanny skill, and Barns had suddenly become a recluse in the computer lab. He refused to tell them what he was working on, so that left Danny hanging awkwardly. Kass did her best to make sure the smaller woman came with her then, as she went about her day. That usually meant Miles would appear in it at some point, but lucky for Kass, Danny was far more open to him than Rachel or, unfortunately, Bluestreak was.

"Howdy, guys!" Miles said cheerfully as he sat down next to Kass that evening for dinner. He grinned specifically over at Danny and Rachel, who he must have known were less friendly toward him than Kass would have been. "How are you all this fine evening?"

"Cold," Danny replied, shrugging. It was a little chilly, even in the heated cafeteria. "Though we've had worse. The mountains were never very comfortable in the winter."

"That sucks. We're actually warmer out here than over on the East Coast. I spend Christmas over there usually, and boy, do they have a lot of snow," he replied, sympathetic. His eyes immediately brightened, however, when he saw what was on the menu. "Oh, good, roast beef!"

Kass smiled as he took control of the conversation out of eagerness. He was just enthusiastic about life, she had told Arcee in amusement one day. She had only had to explain once about her background and Miles just took it and said, "okay," before moving on. She never wanted pity and Miles didn't do pity. She sort of liked that.

It was just the four of them that night; they had long since ditched the need for Arcee or Jazz to watch out for them in the cafeteria. Sam and Mikaela were spending time with Bumblebee off base in the nearest town on some desperate attempt at a date. Miles had suggested going off base as a group excursion, but… Kass had doubts NEST would like the four human survivors leaving un-chaperoned by NEST soldiers. Kass had her own fears of what they'd encounter in a world like this. She dreaded the cars mostly; she still found it difficult to believe there were as many of them out on the streets as Miles told her there were.

Rachel had ignored everyone for most of the meal, especially when Miles was the one chattering away. They had somehow gotten to the topic of their nationalities (something Miles had been fascinated with) and he was all too eager to share information about himself.

"…I think I have British ancestors, too," he said through a mouthful of food, making Kass frown in disgust. They'd have to work on his table manners next. "I know I do, actually. It's cause of my last name."

"What is your last name?" Danny asked, curious as always. She had never bothered with one, since
she had never had one really. She had never seemed that interested with any of their other humans' names. Kass was just happy she was keen to hold a conversation with Miles at all.

"Lancaster," Miles said. He continued on without pause, seemingly without breath too. "See, I had to do this history project before, Sam'll tell you, that's how he found out about his crazy uncle dude he said that the government was hiding or whatever. In my project, though, I found out I was like related to this noble in England, which is awesome, so I have British in my—"

"Lancaster?"

Miles froze and Kass was surprised when the least likely person spoke up at their table. Glancing across from her, Kass saw Rachel was staring at Miles with an odd expression, her notebook long forgotten.

"Er, yes?" Miles offered, also surprised the morose woman was speaking to him.

"Miles Andrew Lancaster?" Rachel repeated, eyes going wide. Kass… wasn't sure if she should be alarmed. Rachel didn't look angry, just… shocked.

Miles arched an eyebrow. "Uh, yeah?" He might have been wary, but his self-preservation instincts left something to be desired. Kass was grateful he had never had to learn to hone them.

"…Holy fuck." Rachel seemed to suffer an eye spasm before blurtting out, "You're my uncle."

There was a pause. Kass looked straight upwards for a moment in silence.

And then…

"WHAT?"

It was more than her who shouted; Danny had choked on her coffee and Miles also yelled out in surprise. Rachel just gawked at Miles, who gawked right back at her.

"Seriously!" the blond older woman exclaimed, jittery enough to nearly jump up out of her seat. "You look like the pictures mom showed me! Your sister is named Sarah Jeanette Lancaster, right?"

Miles just looked at her, slack-jawed. "…Yes?" he said, voice squeaking. Kass felt light-headed herself.

"What the shit, what are you doing here?" Rachel demanded, suddenly suspicious. She motioned around them. "My mom lived in New York!"

"Sarah lives in New York with my dad and my step-mom," Miles said, looking astonished. He paused and suddenly peered closer at Rachel, as if just noticing something. "…Wait, seriously? You're my… my…" Miles suddenly stood up straight, shouting, "But you're older than my sister!"

"I'm older than my mom!" Rachel yelled in similar volume, mildly horrified, now actually standing. "Fuck!"

Kass also stood, alarmed. "Wait, hold up, what?!"

Slowly, a more concise picture came into being. Rachel's mother was a Sarah Lancaster, who had grown up with her father and mother in New York City. Miles' had a sister named Sarah Lancaster, who lived with his father and step-mother in New York City, Sarah was technically Miles' half sister. Going by the names alone, and the fact that Miles and Rachel suddenly looked incredibly similar
with their blond hair and blue eyes… the group of humans were left with an awkward moment of reflection.

Kass stared at her friends, astonished, because this was probably the last revelation she had ever dreamed of having in their very odd new home.

"Technically, she isn't my mom… she won't be, unless she meets a Kyle Reese Cooper," Rachel was saying, eyes wide. She ran a hand through her hair as she looked back at Miles as if he were some sort of dangerous animal. "They were the same age, but I don't know, since they met in the evacuation overseas…" She shook her head slowly. "So weird."

Miles also looked stunned, but as usual, he recovered rather quickly. "Yeah… um…" He smiled at her with a sheepish grin. "You've grown up nice," he offered weakly.

"Screw you, I'm older than you are," Rachel snapped, even as Danny laughed at the absurdity. With a frustrated sigh, Rachel flung back against her seat. "Why can't we have a normal day around here? Seriously?"

Danny was the first to relax a little, chuckling as she leaned back in her own seat. "That's what we get for time traveling, I suppose," she said teasingly. Rachel just scowled.

Before Kass could begin to contemplate the serious philosophical quandaries of their discovery, however, she looked up in surprise to see one of the NEST soldiers hovering awkwardly next to them. She then noticed that a decent number of the men and women had left during Rachel's explanation. Normally seeing soldiers rushing off somewhere would be a bad thing, but none of them seemed like it was an emergency.

The soldier in front of them did look a bit nervous, though. "Hey, the helicopter mech is out of debriefing now," the soldier said. He gestured awkwardly over his shoulder. "Uh, in case you wanted to know…"

Vortex was back? Kass sat up in alarm and mild happiness. He was all right then! That was an utter relief.

Rachel all but leapt out of her seat. "I'm gonna kick his ass!" she shouted, both elated and angry, as she ran past the startled man.

"Be gentle, he's already upset!" Kass called after her. She shook her head grimly. She did not want to have to deal with more fallout from that. They had to be gentle, because no matter how gruff he acted, the helicopter was very sensitive to how others perceived him.

"You wanna go see him too?" Miles asked, finishing his soda off and crushing the can.

"In time," she said, hoping that it'd be easy enough to talk with Vortex in the peace of their own camp. She stood up with her tray. "I guess I should go see where everyone else is to make sure they're not swarming him."

Danny was last to finish, so they waited for her to put her tray back. Kass was distracted away from her conversing friends, however, when she saw the shadow of a mech outside the cafeteria doors; she would recognized him anywhere.

Hovering impatiently by the door, Bluestreak brightened upon seeing Kass leave and walk up to him, but he was still uncharacteristically quiet as he watched her.

"Blue, there you are," she said, smiling at her friend. "Thank you for waiting." The cafeteria was just
too small to let anyone bigger than Jazz squeeze in. Even Bumblebee couldn't sit inside.

Bluestreak, despite his usually friendly demeanor, looked almost like he was sulking. "Are you finally coming back?" he asked, sounding quite cross. His doorwings were twitching and he was almost bitter as he crossed his arms against his chest. "I thought you wanted to spend time with me before bed. You know, like we used to do."

She wasn't going to mention that it was barely six in the evening, nor was she going to comment on how his doorwings flared dramatically when Miles appeared, laughing cheerfully about something with Danny, watching the human move as if the boy were a drone instead of a human being. Kass sighed quietly to herself.

"...Sure," she said, trying to be calm. She turned and smiled pleasantly at Miles, who had made his way over to her after waving at Danny. "I'll see you tomorrow, Miles. Say goodnight to Sam and Mikaela for me, please."

"Sure!" he replied, grinning cheerfully. He waved at them as he turned to go the opposite way. "Good night. You too, Blue-bot."

Miles was far enough away that he missed hearing the almost inaudible thrum that went through Bluestreak. Kass sighed lowly and glanced upwards at her metal friend.

"That was unnecessary," she said coolly once Miles had left the area. Miles had yet to realize, or at least acknowledge that he did, how negatively Bluestreak reacted to his presence. Sam swore that Miles was highly observant, but maybe he was just avoiding what he didn't want to see here.

"What?" Bluestreak said, noticing she noticed. He turned away and seemed impatient to leave. "I didn't do anything. Come on. I'm tired."

Bluestreak never complained about being tired; he was very bad at lying, too. "Alright, alright," Kass said, trying to avoid a fight. She frowned as she stared at the back of his leg armor as they walked, him sullen and her apprehensive. "You have a scrape on the back of your leg. Where'd that come from?"

"I was helping Epps and Jolt with construction earlier," the mech replied, shrugging. The slight bitter tone in his voice, obviously unknown to him, remained. "What did you do earlier, when I was working?"

Kass was tempted to tease him again on being so unsubtle, but not for this conversation. "I spent a lot of the morning with Ratchet again, but I had lunch with Mikaela," she replied carefully. She reasoned there was no sense in avoiding what Bluestreak was expecting to hear. "Miles ended up joining us in the med-bay later. The only reason for that was because Ratchet left early and didn't kick him out right away."

As expected, Bluestreak immediately lowered his doorwings and seemed to scowl. "Hmp." The doorwings gave an irritated twitch. "Of course he was with you. He's always with you now."

Deep breath. Release. "...Bluestreak," Kass began, trying to approach the matter calmly, because she did not want to upset her friend. She wasn't angry, but he might perceive her to be.

Immediately, however, Bluestreak shut down. "Never mind," he said, walking a little more quickly than before.

"Bluestreak, wait," Kass said, glad that he did stop and she could catch up. She walked up to him and motioned with her hand. "Pick me up, please."
She did not ask, nor want, to be picked up by a mech often. She had finally convinced Ratchet to install ladders in the med-bay so they didn't have to rely on him to lift them up to the tables anymore. Bluestreak understood her dislike of being grabbed up like a cat, so he automatically accepted her request out of surprise and gently lifted her up to face him. Kass braced herself as she stood on his hands, making sure his attention was solely on her when she spoke.

"If you can honestly look me in the eyes right now and tell me that I've suddenly stopped caring about you or anybody else in our family, you need to adjust your optics, mate," she said, keeping her emotions in check. She made sure her eyes were meeting Bluestreak's, unfaltering. "I'm not replacing anyone. I'm just making friends."

The Praxian's doorwings quivered, the shadow dancing against the wall they had stopped in front of. "He's like a parasite," he said suddenly, accusing and desperate. Kass scoffed.

"He's..." She avoided saying, like you. That wouldn't do. "He's kind. I'm glad we became friends."

"But we're friends," he whined, quite literally, his doorwings fluttering. Kass belatedly realized he was throwing a temper tantrum. Five-year-old giant alien robots. What was next?

"People can have more than one friend, obviously. You're friends with all of our family members," she pointed out, trying to remain calm. "Outside people are okay, too."

Bluestreak shifted and Kass realized he had just stopped himself from stamping his foot. "But they're outside," he complained.

That was quite enough. Kass pointed her finger at his faceplates, eyes narrowing.

"They're still available to be mates with, Bluestreak," she said, unable not to let her voice grow sharp. She was sick and tired of fighting, of any sort. "This is how humanity works. We never made outside friends before, because there were no people to be friends with!"

There was no precedence in their group for allowing outsiders to get close. All the outsiders they had ever met had been in camps, where Bluestreak had still reacted negatively, but he had always had the luxury of them leaving the camps eventually and never seeing those same people again.

Now... things were far more permanent.

Bluestreak looked stricken by Kass's words, and probably her vehemence behind them. His doorwings immediately dropped and his mouth hung open in shock. Kass was surprised to see how much fear remained in his optics. He wasn't angry she was meeting other people, she realized then; he was terrified.

She literally could not believe she was facing down an alien with xenophobia, of all things.

...My God, we really all are crazy, she thought in a daze. Or at least very, very messed up.

She couldn't yell at him, or even get angry. He was just scared, like her and the rest of their group, but for different reasons. She couldn't bear to be the reason Bluestreak became upset. He was her brother. She just hoped he'd understand why things were different and why they were better.

Kass wilted under Bluestreak's expression. "Blue, I don't want to upset you, but I... I do like Miles around," she said, suddenly exhausted. "He's funny and sweet. He's just awkward, but I know that's not what bothers you." Frowning, Kass reached out and touched his faceplates in attempt to comfort. "Just know that you're still my brother and I love you. Nothing, no one, will replace that."
"I don't like this. I want us to stay together," he said, a whine in his voice. He cradled her closer and Kass felt significantly dwarfed under his green optics, which were brimming with emotion. "We already lost Wheeljack. I don't want things to change anymore."

It was heartbreaking. Kass grimaced, trying to hold back her own feelings. Being strong for the sake of her friends wasn't an unknown concept. It wasn't easy, however.

"I know… I know, sweetie. I'm sorry," she replied quietly. She shook her head slowly. "But this isn't you losing people. This is gaining new friends."

Bluestreak visibly hesitated, panic and uncertainty flashing across his face. "I…"

It wasn't right to pressure him. He needed more time. "Once upon a time we didn't know Jazz or Wildrider or Danny. We met them and became friends with them. I think that could happen again, with Sam and Mikaela and Miles and Bumblebee." She was quiet for a moment, letting him absorb that. "You don't have to accept it now," Kass said gently. "But just… please understand that I don't want to lose the chance to make new friendships right now."

She wanted to be friends with Miles, and with Sam and Mikaela. They were good people who seemed to genuinely care about her and her friends' well-being. They needed to make alliances to ensure that even if NEST broke down, their group of ten had people to rely on.

Even more than that… it was nice to be able to make friends. Real ones, instead of passersby whom Kass would never see again in their old hellhole of a world.

Keeping her hand on Bluestreak's cheek, Kass forced herself to smile.

"Let's just go to bed, Blue," she said. He tilted his head and whined, but agreed.

He would be all right. They—both herself and Bluestreak—just needed patience. She could do that. Miles would be there regardless, giving Kass all the time she needed to take care of her little brother.

They would be all right.

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That Evening

Rachel refused to admit she had a bounce in her step, but honestly, she couldn't deny that she was more upbeat than she had been in months. Not that their living conditions or the war had improved any, but after being able to fly around all day plus make some unexpected revelations about her family, it had been a rather decent day overall.

She had an uncle. And her mother was alive, the psycho, but Rachel still felt a bit light-headed over that fact. But her uncle—nearly two years younger than her and incredibly less mature—was there on base. She had never met him and had only heard vague stories from her mother on her more coherent days, but now Rachel could see for herself a real Lancaster. She might never see a real Cooper, but she wasn't about to ignore the other half of her blood.

More than anything, Vortex was back, finally. She was irritated no one had said anything earlier, but the helicopter had had to go through debriefing with the Autobots, too. Rachel had quickly walked all over the base to find him, but after being turned away from Hangar C by a soldier, she waited impatiently by their hangar to meet the runaway mech. She had her other friends, of course, but somehow ranting to them felt wrong. Vortex always put up with her angry rants. Surely he'd tolerate her not-so-hysterical one.
"Vortex!" she exclaimed, trying not to sound too excited. This wasn't exciting, it was merely different, she told herself fiercely. She smiled at the approaching mech, who seemed very quiet. "There you are! I've been looking for you, jerk."

She meant that as a joke, as always, and Vortex seemed to understand, as always. He didn't lighten up though. His battlemask was only good at hiding his emotions from strangers. Rachel could see melancholy still in his visor.

"Sorry," he said gruffly as they stopped in front of each other. He looked over his shoulder from where he had come. "Had to talk with Jazz and the Autobots."

Rachel nodded, understanding. "Right. I bet they chewed you out. What the fuck were you thinking, running off like that? You're acting like me." She grinned, still on that odd high. "Did Jazz tell you?"

"Tell me what?" the mech asked, looking down at her quickly. An edge of concern was in the back of his vocalizer, but Rachel just smiled, waving her hand.

"About the Miles Lancaster kid. You know, the weird blond kid that follows Kass around all the time?" she asked, before continuing without giving him the chance to reply. "I think he has a crush on her, but whatever. Point is, I know him. Sort of."

His quizzical expression prompted her onward. She rambled off the whole story, feeling oddly like Bluestreak when he was talking about his teammates on the planet I-don't-care-to-know-Blue on that Goddamn-it-stop-talking-Bluestreak mission. Vortex listened to the whole thing though and Rachel still fought the urge to grin like an idiot. It wasn't that big a deal, but it was still… something.

"…Jazz was all happy and said I should go meet Sarah, but hell no," she said, rolling her eyes. She peered up at the helicopter, whose visor wasn't revealing his emotions at the moment. Usually she could pick them out. "TC was happy too, but he was still upset about pushing you away. He apologized, right?"

Vortex rumbled, but didn't seem to get upset. "Yes." If anything, he was oddly calm.

"Good, I was gonna have to kick his aft otherwise," Rachel told him, trying to get him to cheer up. "God, it is so weird! I still can't believe Miles is my uncle. Or that mom is alive." She paused, grimacing. "Jesus, that's just freaking weird. Kass said I should reach out to her, but fuck that, man. I have enough problems with her, you know? She's only like eight right now anyway. Weird shit, man."

She shuddered and crossed her arms against her chest. She wondered if she should even bother thinking about the situation. It was mildly fascinating and a little exciting to think she actually had some sort of connection to this world, though technically Miles wasn't really her uncle, but…

Family was… family.

Smirking, Rachel looked up at her helicopter. She knew he was probably thinking how inane her enthusiasm was, and she certainly didn't expect him to actually care about the situation, but maybe this was what they needed to start joking around again. It had certainly cheered her up—

Vortex, despite standing there and not moving away from her in disgust, wasn't looking at her. He was staring off slightly above her head, clearly not focused on the topic at hand. He had hummed lowly at the end of her ranting, but his lack of attention was a bit surprising. Usually he could tolerate human rambling a lot better than Bluestreak's or Wildrider's. Then again… he was still standing there. He wasn't angry.
Rachel arched an eyebrow at the pensive mech. "What's with the long face?" she asked, now suspicious. Was he still upset over the fight?

Surprising her even more, Vortex suddenly turned and motioned with his hand. "Walk with me," he said. It wasn't a command as much as a suggestion. He didn't wait around for her to follow and he slowly started toward the back of the hangar.

"…Okay," Rachel murmured as she hurried to catch up. She fell into step with him, easily able to keep up with his longer-limbed slow walk.

They didn't travel far; there wasn't much space toward the back anyway. Rachel obliged the silent mech, considering that she couldn't really offer him much comfort to begin with. If he wanted to talk serious, she could do that. She owed him that much, anyway.

Vortex reached the back wall first, where there was another exit, slightly less large than front one, but still big enough for a mech to use if they bent down. Rachel wondered if he wanted to go outside. Before she had a time to turn and ask him what was wrong, Vortex stopped. He was still for a moment before he finally spoke:

"I'm going to do something stupid."

Rachel froze and then looked up at the mech. He was just staring down at her. His expression revealed nothing about his feelings. He just stood there, the dark sky outside the door his backdrop.

"Oh?" she asked, a trickle of worry slowly forming in her chest. Stupid was a strong word. Stupid meant death in their previous world, but this one… she wasn't quite sure.

Vortex looked away, strangely calm. "Yeah. I thought I'd let you know."

Let her know? Let her know what? Rachel forced air in and out of her lungs. She did not like his behavior at all. He was too calm when he should have been freaking out, considering he was claiming he was about to do something stupid. Stupid got you killed—

"Where are you going?" she asked, the only sensible question. She saw how he was looking out the door. He had led them there on purpose.

Vortex turned and looked down at her. He didn't even crouch. "…I can't stay here," he said at length. He shook his helm. "We don't belong here. Especially me."

Rachel clenched her hands together to avoid having them shake. "Should... any of us... should I go with you?" she asked, mind and mouth stumbling over those words. She had wanted to run, sure, but only if they went all together. Going it solo or in a smaller group was just insane.

"No," Vortex said quickly, shaking his head firmly. "Don't... don't follow me. You'll only get killed."

That meant he was going somewhere dangerous, violent, unsafe for humans. There were only a few places like that in a world like this. Rachel didn't want to think about any of those places, or the creatures that lurked there.

"What about you?" she demanded, terrified now. "A-are you planning on getting yourself slagged?"

"I'm not actively trying, no, but..." Vortex struggled again to say whatever he wanted to say next. "Just... don't..."
He stopped. Rachel waited beneath his shadow, just… waiting. She didn't want to hear it. She hated how his visor flashed with emotion, or how he forced a shake out of his limbs, or how he seemed fucking terrified, just like she felt.

"Don't forget those years. All of us," he said lowly, his words like daggers. His visor was so dark. "I don't regret teaming up with you all, even the Autobots. We were a family."

Rachel found it difficult to breathe. "We still are," she said, voice cracking.

Vortex just stared at the wall and didn't respond to the emotion. "I can't stay. Not like this," he said simply, bluntly.

He started to turn and Rachel didn't realize she had taken a step closer. She wanted to reach out and— and grab him. Or hit him. Or just do something.

"Vortex…" she began. Since when did her voice quake like that?

Vortex paused. He turned his helm and stared down at her. "This won't be the last time you see me. I promise," he said. He sounded far away already.

It wasn't fair. "Wheeljack made promises, too," Rachel said, throat making it more like a whisper. She wanted to scream.

That seemed to make Vortex hesitate even more. He turned to face her and his visor met her eyes piercingly.

"The difference between him and me is that he was an Autobot. The rules are different," he said quietly. He seemed to struggle to find the right words. "Decepticons may break promises more easily, but… I won't lie to protect someone else." He stopped and Rachel shuddered when he just looked at her. "Because we don't care like that. So when I promise you that… please know I mean it, at least now. If nothing else."

Rachel just looked back at him, her heart breaking.

"You're not a Decepticon," she whispered, terrified.

Vortex tilted his helm and took a step backwards. "Goodbye, Rachel," he said, meaning it, revealing nothing.

She could have run to go grab Jazz, or Thundercracker, or even one of the Autobots. Anyone. She could have made a scene and made someone stop him, before he left her line of sight.

But she didn't. She watched in silence as he ducked through the door and disappeared into the night, maybe to run off base or maybe to fly when it was clear. She couldn't tell. She stood there alone and said nothing.

To be honest, she told herself the following morning, she wasn't surprised to hear the panicked and hurried shouts about an escape. Vortex was long gone by that point. She wasn't surprised in the least.

That didn't stop the ache deep within her chest, one that never seemed to go away anymore. She refused to cry and she didn't.

Piece by piece, their group was falling apart.

She wondered who was next.
Next, TC and Prowl have a short talk, and the survivors get to prove they can still kick some aft.

A/Ns:
-"Tiny" – I humbly blame femme4jack for Thundercracker's new nickname that makes me laugh way too much…
-The Uncle Miles thing was actually an accident when I realized Miles and Rachel could totally be related. It's not too important, but I thought it'd be a fun twist. ;)
-Xenophobia – not entirely related to legit aliens. It's a phobia, according to Wikipedia, related to being afraid of new people encroaching on one's environment and having a "desire to eliminate its presence to secure a presumed purity." Bluestreak was one of the last people to join their family, so he's never had to deal with permanent new friends. As the characters have suggested, none of the survivors are quite right in the head after everything. (Thank you for the psych research help, Kelly!)
-If you get the reference with Sarah and Kyle (Reese) Cooper, you owe Shantastic a high-five. ;)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

In case you missed the note earlier, the horrible ending on Sunday was a prank! :) Here is the real chapter 31! Also, keep in mind you probably won't be able to review to this chapter unless you do it anonymously/not logged in, or review a previous chapter you haven't yet. Sorry for the confusion.

The future survivors get a chance to prove their worth. Vortex, on the other hand, might not. TC, this is not the 1980s, stop using horrible one-liners. Thank you, Shantastic!

**Warnings:** character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

**Disclaimer:** Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

Plumas NEST Base
California, USA

It was all his fault. Not the attack that had woken them all up in alarm. No. The panic afterwards, when they realized that Vortex was gone—silently and without a trace—that was Thundercracker's fault. No one said a word to him or Jazz, outside of inquiries as to where they thought the missing helicopter was, but they didn't need to accuse him. He knew.

This was *all* his fault.

Thundercracker barely remembered going to the communication center after Sideswipe had come barreling (foolishly so) into their encampment, nearly sending Wildrider lashing out at him instinctually, telling them to hurry over. That's when they'd realized that Vortex was missing. Worried, the humans had searched the base, along with Bluestreak and Wildrider. He had gone with Jazz and Arcee, following Sideswipe back to the communications center to hear about the other bad news of the day.

"We have reports of six unidentified jets flying south over Vancouver," Lennox said, his briskness barely covering his nervousness. "There are several major cities in Washington and California that could be targets, but we're thinking it's going to be L.A."

Mirage, the recently promoted Autobot Special Ops officer, frowned deeply. "Why?"

"More Cybertronian signatures were detected just east of the city," Epps said. He shook his head grimly. "Plus the fact someone called the cops to report seeing a garbage truck that stood up outside their apartment."

"We can be there in an hour," Prowl added, hurried. He turned and gave Thundercracker a look devoid of any sort of emotion; the jet was too numb to really feel anything himself. "Thundercracker, we will be needing your air support."
"What? Where is th' Air Force—?" Jazz immediately broke in, visor wider than before.

"We will have Raptors to meet him there and provide support, but they haven't had enough training and our fastest jets just aren't fast enough. We need something better than ordinary pilots," Lennox replied, eyes hard. "We cannot risk Los Angeles. We need every ace, Jazz."

And their only flying ace happened to be Thundercracker, who was also a Seeker, who knew how to fight and fly like one of their enemies. It was the optimal solution. Thundercracker nodded and agreed to go; he had to.

That didn't make Jazz feel better, who was visibly shaken and trailed after the jet as they hurried back to the other part of the hangar to have a moment to themselves before they were forced to separate for transportation to L.A.

"L.A. is all hills, an' lots an' lots of residential pockets," Jazz was saying, almost rambling from nervousness. "Ya can't fly low there, so if ya can, lure th' other Seekers outta range. Wait, slaggit—we can't provide ground support if ya go too high—but we can't risk th' civilians, like Prowl an' Will said, so—!"

Silently, Thundercracker grabbed Jazz's erratically moving hand and held it still. That made the Autobot cease his ranting and stare up at the jet in shock.

"I know how to fly," Thundercracker replied quietly. He gently squeezed Jazz's hand. "Stop worrying."

Jazz just looked at him, visor still bright and wide. Thundercracker stared back and fought a variety of his own emotions. He wanted to stay. He couldn't care less about being asked into battle at this point; that wasn't the problem. The problem was… he was leaving… at the worst time.

Gently, Jazz reached up and Thundercracker numbly obliged him by lowering his helm down for the shorter mech to reach. The silver claws rested against Thundercracker's faceplates and seemed to become heavier against his plating with each passing moment.

"It's not yer fault," Jazz said, voice faint. He tried to smile. "We'll find him. He's just blowin' off steam. We'll find him."

That's what the saboteur had been telling him every chance he could that morning. Jazz was positively frantic over Vortex's disappearance, but he hid it because he was trying to hide his own guilt as well as trying to keep Thundercracker from feeling guilty. It wasn't working, but the jet appreciated the gesture.

They'd find him. It was just… not the right time. Thundercracker laid his own hand over Jazz's and sighed.

A loud clanging sound caused Thundercracker to turned and look—up? He saw two familiar women charge down the catwalk next to him. Rachel was leading Danny as they rushed to come up alongside the mechs.

He was not ready to speak with Rachel. Not right now. Thundercracker fought a furious wave of guilt and trepidation. He deserved her anger; her wild eyes made him want to run the other way, however—

"It's true?" Rachel immediately blurted out, before giving them a chance to react. She looked anxious and upset, as did Danny. "You're going to fight the Decepticons?"
Oh. Thundercracker didn't know if he felt relieved or more nervous about the true source of Rachel's distress. A quick glance at Jazz gave him nothing to feel better over.

"We have no choice," he said at length, shaking his head at her. "The Air Force can't cope with the Seekers." London had taught them that.

Danny hesitated. "So... you're going to fight them alone?" she asked, sounding vaguely horrified.

Jazz tried to keep them calm, as always, by smiling and waving his hands. "Don't worry, TC's got this," he said soothingly. "He won't be alone—he'll have air support. B'sides, I'm gonna be watchin' long side on th' ground, so I can save his aft if I gotta."

"Wait," Rachel began, her eyes even wider, "you're both going? !"

"I'm gonna head in with ground support," Jazz said. He nodded up at Thundercracker before him. "TC's our star flier, an' he'll be leadin' th' charge herdin' th' fliers off course."

Rachel did not look pleased. "Why do they need TC, so bad?" she demanded.

Thundercracker frowned at the frantic human. "I was part of Starscream's trine and that means I know nearly all of the Seeker's battle plans and formations," he explained, shaking his helm. "More importantly, we didn't just get to where we were by being average soldiers, even amongst the Seekers."

At Rachel and Danny's bewildered expressions, Thundercracker looked to Jazz, who simply shook his own head. Right.

"Skywarp could teleport... I have something different," Thundercracker finally said, turning back to the humans.

Rachel hesitated. "...What does that mean?" she asked.

"TC ain't called 'thunder-cracker' fer no reason," Jazz said smoothly, answering her question vaguely enough to keep them guessing in silence. Turning, the saboteur turned and flashed the taller jet a shaky grin. "I'm excited. I've never got t' see ya in yer prime b'fore."

"I was there at the battle of Tyger Pax," Thundercracker replied dryly. As had Jazz been, so clearly he had seen Thundercracker doing his thing before, directly to Autobot reinforcement fliers.

Jazz frowned, but quickly recovered, using his smile to cover up his nervousness. "...Right. Well, I've never seen ya doin' yer thing against my enemies, 'steada my allies. So it'll be nicer t' watch this time," he teased. A glint of seriousness entered his visor as he leaned closer and added quietly, "You better come back t'me, fly boy. I mean it."

Thundercracker leaned down to touch their helmets together, lingering slightly over the smaller mech. "I will," he said. Turning his head, he leaned a little and held out his hand to Rachel on the catwalk, who was watching him with a range of emotions flickering across her face. "Be good for the others, please."

Rachel struggled to contain her own emotions. "Just come back alive, jerk," she said, taking the offered limb in a tight embrace. He smiled gently and tried to memorize the feel of the organic holding onto his hand.

He'd come back to this.
After that short moment, Thundercracker reluctantly removed his fingers from her grasp and forced himself to march over to the waiting planes and NEST officials. He was the lynchpin to their aerial support right now and he needed to be there. He knew what he was getting into, more-so than many of the NEST soldiers probably.

They would handle Vortex later. If anything, he was just throwing a temper tantrum—rightfully so—and would arrive back at the compound soon. Then, Thundercracker wouldn't wait to apologize. That had probably been the reason the helicopter had left again. It must have been, hence his fault.

He only could hope that Rachel, the humans and the remaining mechs of their team on base wouldn’t try anything stupid now while they were away, like rushing into the woods to try to find Vortex themselves. They'd have time later; Thundercracker would not let this drag on any longer than necessary.

"Thundercracker," someone said, breaking into his thoughts suddenly.

Looking to the side, Thundercracker realized he had been standing stiffly at the edge of the airfield, waiting for the NEST team to get their helicopters ready for the trip to Amedee. He had entirely missed the arrival of an Autobot now hovering awkwardly in his shadow.

Prowl was looking back up at him, seemingly impassive, but within his usual blank façade, Thundercracker could see the tactician was nervous. Just… slightly.

"What?" Thundercracker demanded, not caring if he sounded antagonistic at this point. He didn't want to deal with this mech now—

Prowl hesitated. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

The sounds of the soldiers preparing for their flight faded instantly into white noise as Thundercracker stared down at the black-and-white mech. This was the second time Prowl had made a point to speak to him alone since coming here, and again had said something that was completely unexpected.

"What?" Thundercracker asked, harsh. What the frag would the other mech apologize to Thundercracker for? "For what?"

"Sending you in without proper backup," Prowl replied, completely professional, not showing a single bit of the apprehension Thundercracker knew he felt. "We're lacking adequate air support until Hyperion arrives. Even with the help of the Air Force, you're heading into a dangerous situation. My plan for this situation has a lower chance of success than I prefer to accept on most missions."

…This was not what Thundercracker needed. Not now. He didn't want kindness from mechs he felt better off hating, even if he didn't quite hate them. They had to avoid arguments, however. The sooner he got off base, blew some Decepticons out of the air and got back, the sooner Thundercracker could start fixing his own mistakes.

"As long as you're not purposely trying to get me slagged," he finally bit out, averting his gaze.

Prowl stopped. "Why would I do that?" he asked, honestly startled by the statement. Thundercracker was also a bit surprised at himself for extending the conversation.

He could have said anything in reply. A lie. A misleading answer. Thundercracker peereded down at the smaller mech and realized that Prowl was just as uneasy about his reply as Thundercracker was. Thundercracker wasn't entirely sure he knew why, either.
"I know you still love him," he said after a moment. He ignored Prowl's immediate, if not faint, wince, and stood his ground. "I love him, too."

He didn't mean to make that a challenge, but it was there. And Prowl didn't react. He stared up at the Seeker, calm and outwardly devoid of anger or any other emotion.

The single twitch of his doorwing, however, spoke loudly.

"...We shouldn't be talking about this," the tactician said stoically. He stood back, doorwings flaring in almost a miniaturized mirror image of Thundercracker's own wingspan. "Good luck, Thundercracker."

Glancing behind him, Thundercracker saw Jazz peering at both of them from near the helicopters the grounders would be using to fly out. They had to get moving anyway.

"TC," he said, again surprising Prowl as the jet turned and looked back down at the Autobot tactician. "It's easier."

He meant it as conversation, but the way Prowl almost relaxed—if the stoic mech ever did relax—made Thundercracker realize that perhaps he had just waved his own flag for peace between them. Things were different. They didn't have to be difficult, however.

Slowly, Prowl nodded. "...Good luck, TC," he repeated.

Thundercracker watched the smaller mech walk away stiffly, as if he were just as tense over their meeting as Thundercracker felt. It had gone well, though, the jet thought through a haze.

He had more important things to worry about; they all did. He dropped the stray emotions of guilt and wariness that he wasn't sure why he had.

Transforming, Thundercracker readied for launch.

0000

Los Angeles Air Space

The human city was large and expansive. While Thundercracker could certainly not blame them for designing it without thinking about the dangers of a Seeker attack in mind, he still growled in frustration as he took in the geography. Their three sides were guarded by mountains and the fourth by the ocean, but that wouldn't do slag against an aerial assault.

It would have been easy to fight in the air, for him at least, but that wasn't going to be possible. Because Thundercracker was rapidly learning that humans liked to complicate everything.

Lennox sounded rushed over the comm., but clearly took command as he issued orders to Autobots, NEST, the Air Force and... Thundercracker. "You need to draw the Seekers away from the city, or as far as you can," the human said. He was in some vehicle driving, by the sounds in the background.

::Drawing them away will be difficult if they have a target in mind,:: Thundercracker warned. ::You should prepare for combat to take place.::

"You'll be over civilian areas, a lot of it residential," Lennox said. His impatience did not hide the reluctance in his voice; he understood the warning anyway. "But do what you have to, TC. You're in the lead, but don't forget you have the Raptors in support."
Getting told what to do during a fight by an organic… it wasn’t exactly normal for Thundercracker. Sometimes Goddard had shouted suggestions at them about how to fight the drones, but their group had never truly been a military structure, after all. This was almost degrading. Still, Thundercracker acknowledged Lennox’s rank. The rules of war were the same in this, just different players.

::We will be keeping the grounds clear,:: Prowl said over the comm., as the ground troops made their way to the different locations throughout the city, hunting down the origins of the sparse energon readings that had been detected. There were Decepticons down there, somewhere.

::I can’t wait,:: Sideswipe said, almost dreamily.

::Fer a fight? Yer crazy,:: Hound chastised.

::Oh, come on!:: Sideswipe whined. ::This will be like the first time I get to kick some ‘Con aft on this planet! Those fliers ruin everything!::

::Thanks,:: Thundercracker drawled. He paused; he wondered if he was allowed to partake in conversation with the others. Of course it was allowed, but… was it right? He was more than just a newcomer. He was barely an Autobot and it wasn’t like the Lamborghini twins were welcoming the new recruits with open arms.

Sideswipe was entirely unapologetic, which actually made Thundercracker feel better as he approached the edges of the human city. ::Hey, not my fault your creators gave you wings instead of wheels,:: the red Autobot twin said cheerfully. ::You poor, poor spark, you.::

::I wouldn’t say that, ’Sides,:: Jazz broke in, also among the Autobots on the ground. Thundercracker could just hear the mirth in his voice. ::TC’s wings are mighty fine, ’specially right about now, huh? Not t’mention when th’ kids are asleep—::

Sideswipe's gagging noise was promptly overridden by Lennox shouting over the lines in a hurried fashion.

"We have movement to the south," the human said. "Ironhide, take your team to South Grand and West 21st!"

It was frustrating beyond belief to be stuck in the air when he assumed a fight was happening far behind him and below. Thundercracker fought the urge to backtrack; he had his own mission headed the opposite way.

He worried regardless, for Jazz specifically, especially when he barely heard any reports coming in. He focused on the short, aggressive commands being shot back and forth between the Autobots, and tried to gauge just what was happening. Several Decepticon grounders, maybe three, had been sighted and two were being engaged.

::Status?: he asked, directly to Jazz's comm. link after he heard Ironhide give an all clear, a full ten minutes later.

::I think,: Jazz began, vaguely amused despite the slight tinge of hysteria in his words, ::I'm getting' old.::

Thundercracker was immediately concerned. ::Why?:

Jazz sounded distracted, feigning the upbeat emotions again. ::Well, I can still kick aft an’ take names, but my spark’s racin’ up a storm right about now.::
"You're just not used to fighting mechs,: the jet said, trying to be comforting.

"I'm not used t' fightin' faces,: the saboteur muttered, almost like he hadn't intended to.

Thundercracker decided not to make things worse for him. "Anyone hurt?: he asked, his own scanners still hunting out any anomalies over the air.

"Sides and Ironhide are takin' turns rippin' the last 'Con t' pieces, from what I c'n tell,: Jazz replied. "Suckers didn't even get close t' me or Hound, but—whoa, okay, here we go!"

There was a pause in the transmission and Thundercracker waited impatiently. When Jazz did speak again, just a klick later, he was significantly more distracted.

"Found the garbage truck!: Unlike the human communication lines, there were no background sounds to let the jet know what was happening below.

"Focus,: Thundercracker shot back, not willing to distract his mate in the middle of battle.

His own nervous eagerness to fight crept up slowly as he circled the city, anxious for any enemies to appear within his own sphere of combat. It was unfair to leave the bulk of the fighting to the grounders right now, but he didn't want to turn back when they were so concerned with Seekers coming in from the north—

"Hey, Tiny, you still up there?" Epps asked, bursting into the communication relays.


"We're groundin' LAX, 'cause it's your turn comin' up. Two o'clock, north of La Crescenta-Montrose, south of Angeles National Forest and Brown Mountain," the Chief Master Sergeant said, hurried. "All aerial support, rendezvous with friendly NBE flier at coordinates thirty-four degrees thirteen—"

Thundercracker immediately complied, focusing his radar on that location. At once, he could pick up the signs of incoming Seeker formations headed directly for the city. They had followed along the mountains that ringed the city to the north, coming low to avoid detection.

Knowing the height and speed the Seekers would undoubtedly use once they started their assault, Thundercracker climbed to an altitude above that, hoping to use it to hide his own presence. It didn't take long for the Raptors to appear on his radar much closer than before and they quickly ascended to the same altitude. Just in time, Thundercracker thought, as the unmistakable sight of a Seeker trine formation shot across the Los Angeles air space like bullets.

Thundercracker let them pass and travel nearly a thousand yards more before he turned to follow them, far more agile than the human fliers behind him. He made sure he was almost on top of the Seekers as they headed toward the city, making sure they didn't see him yet. The American pilots scrambled to mimic him.

"Give Tiny room to move, he's callin' the shots up there," Epps announced over the pilots' communication channel.

Thundercracker said nothing, but was grateful the humans had the insight to avoid granting the human fliers free range to shoot yet. Their best chance was to surprise their enemy and not give them the room to actively fire back. First contact was his, simply because he knew how to kill these mechs best.
Keeping his altitude, Thundercracker quickly managed to get on top of the Seeker trine. He was unfamiliar with their energy signatures, but that meant little. There had been many Seekers left prior to the war on Earth.

However, some things were the same. He easily patched into the communication frequency they were using. The security codes were even the same. They were lower ranks and didn't notice the intrusion.

::—fragging carbonmonkeys and their slagging fliers!:: the Seeker on his left snarled. ::They're going to be up our afts if we don't finish this in a joor.::

::It's just a few buildings. Won't take long to smoke a few hundred of those organic things.:: one of the others chided, sounding almost bored. ::We're not even supposed to hit the fragging Autobots. Boss's out of his processors about that.::

::Pay attention!:: the third suddenly yelled, suddenly going out of formation. ::We've got company!::

Thundercracker growled lowly as he descended immediately, his cover having slipped. He dove beneath the clouds, causing the remaining two Decepticons to scatter. They couldn't outpace him, even if they had been the ones to surprise him.

He was still Thundercracker, second under Starscream's command, and once part of the alpha trine in the Seeker forces. He kept close on the one he had nearly landed on, enjoying the panic as they desperately tried to figure out what they were dealing with.

::Not organic!:: one of them shouted, unaware he was listening in.

::It's a Seeker—since when the frag did they have one of—wait.:: The comm. was suddenly buzzing with sharp, hurried exclamations as his identity was discovered. ::Primus, Thundercracker! Sir, what are you doing here?::

Thundercracker answered promptly by barraging the unsuspecting 'Con with a hail of bullets, tearing into the most vulnerable spots on the jet's back. He heard the shriek of agony over the comm. as he was sent spiraling downwards, and was satisfied by the panic that ensued from the ones still in the air.

::What are you DOING, you lunatic? !:: one of them demanded.

::My job,:: Thundercracker hissed back, diving straight for the other one.

::You're not Thundercracker!:: the Seeker in front of him snarled. ::Traitor!::

Thundercracker shot his cannons straight at his enemy. ::First, you're wrong—and second, you're right,::: he shot back coldly. ::Feel free to bring it up at court martial—in the Pit!::

The enemy jet went down in flames. Above him, Thundercracker barely dodged return fire from the second trine, who had finally managed to catch up. He quickly ducked below another cloudbank in order to dodge behind them. The one on the port side wisely saw through his plan and shot out of formation to lose Thundercracker on his tail only to daringly fall all too close to the other jet, forcing him to slow down.

The Seeker had been expecting Thundercracker to fall back; thusly so, Thundercracker sped up. He transformed mid-air, his turbines keeping him level as he lunged and grabbed hold of the now panicking Seeker. He ripped into the other jet's back with his bare hands.
You're so sexy when you're pissed, Jazz told him cheekily over the NEST comm. as Thundercracker sliced through another wing. At least he was still alive.

Growling, Thundercracker hurled the downed Seeker away and transformed, shooting off after another. *I'm going to punch you in the helm if you don't stop distracting me.*

Ooh, you're in that kind of mood. I like my jets assertive.

*Primus, can you at least PLEASE use your private comm. links?* Sideswipe howled somewhere over the intercom. Jazz burst out laughing. Even fainter was Hound's chuckling.

Why would we do that? the saboteur teased back, merciless as Thundercracker chuckled darkly at Sideswipe's ranting.

All at once, the mirth vanished when another officer spoke up. *Please stay focused on the battle at hand.* Prowl's voice interrupted, cold but professional. *There is no room for this sort of behavior now.*

Instantly cowed, Jazz stopped talking all together and Thundercracker felt what reminded him of shame flood his own spark. He didn't say anything; there was nothing to be ashamed of logically. Logically.

He took his emotions and put them into his attack. He quickly overtook the third Seeker from the original trine and blasted him out of the sky. The remaining two were far ahead and naturally should have outpaced the American Air Force. However, he was surprised to see the combined effort of the human pilots bring the slower one down. The blazing remains tumbled out of the sky.

*I'll get the last one,* he said over the comm. The pilots didn't reply, but they obediently backed off to let the Neutral shoot ahead after the rapidly disappearing Decepticon jet.

This one was fast; too elusive to try to fire on. They were going too close to residential areas as well, Lennox kept saying. They could either try to herd the Seeker out of the city entirely, or take it down now.

Taking his chances, Thundercracker decided to end the chase. He used to love the sport of hunting his enemies down, when they were actually challenging, but today wasn't right for that.

Thundercracker immediately initiated his attack protocols, while sending a quick warning to the Air Force pilots flanking him from a thousand yards behind now. The last thing he needed was to damage one of their planes; Keller would throw an even bigger fit.

*Shut off all your communication software and back off—now!*

Had Jazz not warned them earlier, the Air Force probably would have lost all of their communication abilities and irreparably damaged the jets. Epps had questioned the need, since a sonic boom just affected nearby audio receptors, like human ears or the radios on the F-22s. Noise wasn't that dangerous.

He apparently didn't realize that Thundercracker wasn't just known for his noise.

Shutting down his own nonessential communication devices, Thundercracker fell back behind the last remaining 'Con, letting him get further ahead. He materialized his underside cannon and took aim, firing once the Seeker fell directly into his targeted path. The explosion sent Thundercracker back, but he was already banking to avoid the damage.
The hypersonic wave ripped through the Seeker, slamming him out of his flight path. The spiral would have been easy to break out of, had he been able to control himself or his now-malfunctioning processes. The sound wave was strong enough to destroy any sensitive equipment in the flier's frame—and there was a lot of that in a Seeker.

To think, this was how he had once brought down Aerialbots. Thundercracker hadn't been able to enjoy watching an enemy tumble out of the sky since the fighting on Cybertron; it took too much power to ever use against the drones in his time on apocalyptic Earth, though it probably would have done significant damage to the wretches.

The Seeker fell low enough that the Air Force, which apparently had listened and kept their distance, swooped in to make the final kill. Thundercracker activated his communication software and was swamped with hurried military chatter.

::Seekers neutralized,:: he said over the comm.. ::Requesting next order.::

"We're not seeing any inbound vamps—or Decepticons on the ground," Lennox replied, sounding distracted over his radio.

::We're clear,:: Ironhide added.

Out of nowhere, he heard Sideswipe whoop. ::That was so cool!:: Jazz snorted; Thundercracker was glad they couldn't see his own amusement.

::All Autobots, head toward locations of fallen Seekers,:: Prowl ordered, focusing the team once more. ::We must make sure they are truly deactivated.::

The grounder Decepticons had also been taken care of, with minimal damage done to the surrounding civilian buildings. No lives on their side had been lost, and if the current chatter filtering through the radio from other branches of the military rescue were current, no civilians had been killed either. The damage from the fallen Seekers would have to be observed later, but even if the falling remains had harmed anyone…

This had been good. Very, very good.

Thundercracker's personal comm. buzzed and he accepted an incoming call from one of the human radios.

"TC?" Lennox asked.

::Listening::

The Major went quiet for a moment as Thundercracker circled slowly back around.

"You are scary as hell, but I'll be damned if that wasn't the coolest thing I've ever seen one of you guys do," he said. Thundercracker chuckled lowly to himself. The human continued by adding, "Seriously, thank you, Thundercracker. You just saved a lot of people today, not just soldiers."

That was not something Thundercracker was used to hearing, though he wasn't about to make a big deal out of it. ::Earning my keep:: he replied, meaning it for the entirety of his family. ::Keep the skies clear, I'm headed in::

0000

Plumas NEST Base
Sitting back at camp while her friends either worked or fought for their lives all day wasn't exactly Danny's cup of tea. By the time late afternoon rolled by, she was antsy and ready to just start hounding the nearest NEST soldier she could find for information.

She had only had Rachel for company, too, which made it worse. Danny had wanted to ask her about Miles and about what she was going to do about her miraculous family connection. That was a fun topic—a happy one, sort of. Rachel had been excited about it yesterday.

But not today. The excitement had disappeared behind a blank wall, locked up tight behind a pale white face and gaunt eyes.

Danny couldn't blame Rachel one bit for clamping up and lounging around on her bed, as if waiting for the world to end without her being there. It was one thing to have both of her parents out fighting with no way of keeping tabs on them. It was another to lie there with the knowledge hanging overhead that one of their closest friends was… missing.

No one knew where Vortex was. That terrified Danny. She couldn't help but look out at the forest whenever someone opened the door to the hangar. She wanted to run out there to look herself, but that would be pointless. She had to wait. It was painful.

Thankfully, news of the battle came much sooner than she had feared. Danny looked up from her magazine—a boring one about fashion again—when she heard a human walk up. She knew it couldn't be Barns, because he clearly had more important things to do than keep his girlfriend company, the jerk. It was Kass back from training, who looked far more cheerful than Danny thought was acceptable with one teammate missing and two more supposedly in the heat of battle.

"Did you hear?" Kass ask in lieu of greeting, sitting down. She grinned at her friends in obvious cheer. "TC and Jazz are back. I saw TC from behind over on the edge of the airfield."

Danny craned her neck to look around the edges of their camp, seeing nothing. "Are they okay?" she asked. Surely Kass wouldn't be that happy if they weren't, but still…

"Yeah, they're talking with the Autobots right now," the dark haired woman explained. She glanced over at Rachel pointedly. "TC was really badass today, Jazz said."

Rachel shook her head. "He's always badass," she said, almost muttering it. She curled up on her cot and shifted irritably until she was flat on her back, her eyes clenched tightly shut.

Danny watched her, nodding. "Yeah."

Kass had been gone most of the day, so she hadn't seen Rachel's increased melancholy. The British woman observed the woman on the cot carefully, glancing over at Danny once who could only shake her head unhelpfully.

"…You okay?" Kass asked, looking at Rachel with concern.

"I'm fine," Rachel grumbled, with the same attitude she'd had each time Danny had pestered her for answers. "I'm tired. Let me sleep."

Danny felt a twinge of nervousness in her gut as she and Kass silently watched Rachel turn over and put her back between them. Something was obviously wrong with Rachel. The silence was new though. Usually, Rachel sulked loudly. This wasn't… normal. Then again, nothing really was
Looking up, Danny caught Kass' eyes and frowned. "I'm worried," she said quietly.


"Yeah… do you really think he's okay?" Danny asked, now very concerned. It had been plaguing her the whole day, even with the threat of the battle to waylay their focus.

Having a missing team member was excruciatingly scary. Once, Danny and Rachel had gotten lost while getting water in a foggy forest. It had taken them hours to get back to camp and when they did, the mechs had been frantic. That was when Danny realized how much Wildrider actually liked her, when he grabbed her up and wouldn't put her down for hours. The reverse happened once or twice, when any of the mechs ever split off to investigate a path ahead and were gone for too long. Danny had never been so worried for her alien friends.

Before, waiting had just been nerve-wracking. Now, it was like waiting for death. Danny shuddered.

"He's probably just… blowing off steam," Kass said lamely, trying to be reassuring. She opened a package of Lo Mein and poured some water from a water bottle into it to get cooking on their little stove.

Danny nodded slowly. "Makes sense… I guess." He definitely had reasons to be upset.

"You don't think so?" Kass asked, arching an eyebrow at her over the cook top.

She wasn't sure what she thought anymore. "He was okay yesterday when he came back. Arcee said he was fine," Danny replied, shrugging.

Kass made a soft sighing sound. "Why'd he run away again?" she asked, mostly to herself. "He was doing so well…"

Danny had her own theories, which probably matched most of their groups' ideas. Thundercracker and Jazz had been silent on the matter, wallowing in obvious guilt, but even Arcee had sent the Autobots on base uncharacteristically dark looks throughout the day. Wildrider had practically accused Ironhide of pushing the helicopter out before the Autobot weapons specialist had left the base.

"I bet it was one of the other mechs." Her words were far more clipped and bitter out loud than she had expected, but she couldn't help it.

Kass looked up at her with an impatient expression. "Danny," she began, probably to ask for patience.

"No! They're always picking on 'Tex and 'Rider," Danny said, suddenly incensed. She glared back at the hangar bay doors, frustrated. "Just because Vortex doesn't want to be a stupid Autobot… it's not fair!"

"I know it's not," Kass said, shaking her head sadly. "But even if anyone did say something to scare him off, he'll come back."

That much, Danny believed, one-hundred percent. Vortex had always sort of been the black sheep, Wheeljack had told her gently, when she had asked many times why Vortex was so easy to anger, why he seemed to enjoy hating on the remaining Autobots. He was different than Thundercracker or
Wildrider, but it didn't matter. He was still part of their family. Danny had seen him react in anger many times, sometimes seriously but mostly in brief moments of irritation.

What had caused him to leave didn't matter. It never had. What did matter was the fact that he would have the sense to return eventually, because Vortex, no matter how gruff he tried to appear or how many times he swore he didn't have Autobot sentimentalities, always came back home.

Because their family was here.

"Where the hell is Barns?" Kass suddenly asked, startling Danny. The dark haired woman shot a confused look around their nearly empty camp. "Has he been cooped up in the computer lab all day? Again?"

Danny immediately scowled past their one wall, toward the computer lab, which had successfully bewitched her boyfriend. "Yeah. He won't leave except to get food and even then I have to make him come with me," she complained.

Kass poked at her noodles, frowning again. "What's he looking at?" she asked.

"I think files from Jazz," Danny said. She shrugged. "He asked him for the drone info."

"Really?"

Danny sighed heavily. "It's my fault. I pressured him into getting more concerned about it…" She shook her head, frustrated. "Why doesn't he just go to—to—the other scientists?" She stumbled over the name she couldn't use. Kass didn't seem to notice, thankfully.

"I dunno." Kass ran a heavy hand through her hair. "This is so messed up."

Approaching mech footsteps made both of them look up, and instantly, Danny felt better. Wildrider and Bluestreak were walking toward the camp and waved at their friends.

"Hey, 'Rider," Danny said, smiling.

While Bluestreak sat down across from her side of the camp and began to ramble to Kass about his day, Wildrider moved over to Danny and smiled. It was a sad gesture that immediately alarmed her.

"Hello," he said. He crouched and offered his hand gently. "I need hug."

"Why?" Danny asked, while she acquiesced and wrapped her arms around the offered hand. She didn't want to imagine something had gone wrong when neither of them had been looking.

Wildrider tilted his helm, smirking slightly. "Things changing fast. Not enough time here, vith group," he said, gesturing vaguely when she released his hand. He sat down with a groan. "Too fast."

Oh, God, she could relate to that. "Yeah… tell me about it," she said, bringing up her legs so that she could tuck them under her chin. She stared at the cook top and steaming bowl of noodles. "I miss everyone being together."

Everything had changed so fast. Even if it was only a few months after they had come here, it was all so new. And it contined to change. Every day. She had no idea what to expect tomorrow, let alone what this war would bring.

"Maybe when things settle again…" Kass murmured, taking her food gently. Wildrider loudly
"Yeah, right," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "Things only going to get worse and busier." Danny looked at the ground, agreeing. She didn't expect to have the chance to just sit down and talk with her family again, not for a long, long time.

"Welcome to fucking war," Rachel growled from underneath her elbow, startling them.

Danny and Kass looked at each other before awkwardly looking away. They could only sit there and wait for the others to drift back—all of them.

*I’ll take what I can get from them*, Danny thought sadly.

It was all she could do now.

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*Mexico Desert*

*That Night*

The desert was cold, both from the time of year and the fact it was the middle of the night. He landed harshly because of his nerves being as shot as they were. He wanted to run the other way. He didn't think he had the courage his benefactors assumed he had. He was no Autobot, no hero. He was Vortex… only Vortex. Not even his brothers could save him now.

He stood alone for almost thirty minutes, listening to the wind howl, reminding him of how lonely his position was. He thought of the cold, crowded forests of Europe and felt homesick.

Vortex focused his thoughts on his mission, not what he had left behind. If he made it out of this alive, he could go back. Maybe. He would not think about that now.

They found him soon after the half hour mark, approaching his location with deadly accuracy and speed. His presence there must have been like a blazing bonfire in the darkness of night, considering the fact that he was holding a locator beacon only Seekers could find. On a place like Earth, it must have been shockingly noticeable to Decepticon forces.

Watching the Decepticons approach was mildly terrifying. Vortex forced himself to stand tall and wait.

The other two had not followed and probably weren't even in the same damn country at this point. They trusted him not to mess this up—as well as undoubtedly not caring enough if he failed. They could always find another way. That's what had defined them this whole time. He was expendable… for now.

He went immediately to his knees the second they were close enough to transform. The harsh sound of metal sliding across metal and gears grinding on each other ripped through the tranquil landscape. Oddly enough it was a comfort to hear it after all that silence.

The middle one, not a Seeker, wasted no time in stomping up close to Vortex, his weapons trained on the kneeling helicopter. His two companions mirrored him. Vortex noted that while they were all fliers, they were regular jets. The middle one was shortest, but when he spoke, Vortex realized he was the commander.

"What is your designation, mech?" he demanded, engines snarling. Cybertronian was such an odd language to hear after decades of human tongue. It was almost dissatisfying to hear it.
Vortex found himself eyeing their guns. "I am a Decepticon," he said, forcing fear out of his processors, leaving only truth in his voice.

The taller one nodded at him, smirking. "Odd color for a Decepticon," he said, gesturing at his faceplates. His visor was still green. Maybe he should have gotten the smarter one to change it for him before he had come here. Too late now.

"I will speak only to our lord, Megatron," Vortex said loudly, lifting his chin higher.

That successfully gave his audience pause. The middle one hesitated, glancing at his comrades briefly. "Megatron now goes by the name Galvatron," he said sharply. "Who are you?"

It was now or never.

"I am Vortex of the Gestalt team Bruticus," he said, a snarl in his own vocalizer. He nodded his head at them, challenging. "Don't bother looking me up."

"Why?" the third one asked, suspicion behind his masked faceplates.

Vortex eyed him pointedly. "You'll find that I'm still stationed with my team, on what I assume is the starship Revenge."

The brief hesitation only reassured him that the ship actually did exist and that his statements were still considered true. Thankfully, their timelines weren't totally different. "You are a deserter?" the middle one demanded, angry now.

"Obviously not," Vortex replied, nonplussed. "There will be two Vortexes who bear allegiance to Lord… Galvatron." He stumbled over his own hatred. He gestured at his chestplates. "Both the one on Revenge and the one you see before you."

*Be vague,* the supposedly-smarter one had told him. *Make them want more.* As an interrogator, this was almost a reverse of what he was supposed to do. Vortex hated it, but he had to admit, he was their best choice for this.

It certainly gave the three fliers vivid pause as that information sank in. Confusion and suspicion became more pronounced and the middle one was clearly at a loss of what to do. "How is that possible?" he asked, optics narrowed.

A perfect opening, for either success or his death. There was no turning back.

He prayed for mercy, regardless.

"Take me to Galvatron, and I will tell you." Vortex narrowed his visor, hardening his spark. "I will tell you everything."

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End Chapter 31.

Chapter End Notes
Lol Vortex what are you doing this is the opposite of good idea. You too, Rachel, get your shit together.

**Please note:** if for any reason I miss a week, it's probably due to some IRL problems myself or my hardworking beta have, but don't worry! XD No more April Fool's Day pranks!

Next, Barns and WJ have a bad day at the office.

**A/Ns:**
- Prowl what are you doing
- Rachel what are you NOT doing
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Foreign relations improve (in more ways than one) and Mikaela and Kass plan for the future. Don't forget to check out the poll, if you haven't already.

Many thanks, Shantastic! This wouldn't be the same without you. :)

**Warnings:** character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

**Disclaimer:** *Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

November

Mikaela generally had little contact with any of the plan makers at NEST. She was content to work in the med-bay, preparing for battles she wasn't entirely sure she would ever be ready for. The mechanics of being a medic were easy enough to learn, but the emotional preparations were… challenging.

Things were changing again, rapidly. The *Hyperion* was getting closer and closer to Earth, much to the chagrin of Keller and the world at large; every newscast lately had a segment that was dedicated to the "alien menace" and nearly every one ended with a video clip of some nameless government flunky talking about how the situation was still "under evaluation." Mikaela could understand why some people didn't want the *Hyperion* team to be there, but frankly, she was getting sick of their denial. They needed those mechs one way or the other; Seeker hit-and-runs were increasing in frequency, there was no sign of the drones and they had struck out on every attempt to find the Decepticon base. Even their recent success in L.A hadn't been enough to remove the gloom that seemed to hover over all of their heads.

It was concerning to her to know that most of the mechs that would be disembarking from the *Hyperion* when it arrived were soldiers—there were very few medics. That only made her more resolved to continue her training and hope that they would not need many medics when things got more intense.

And they had lost track of *Nemesis*. How the hell they could lose a *starship* was beyond Mikaela's knowledge, but it wasn't her business to ask questions. Well, questions concerning war, at any rate. She had many questions that specifically revolved around her own tiny little universe within the NEST compound. And she had plenty of time to think about them, since Ratchet had both her and Kass in the medbay to continue their mastery of the tedious task of minor wire working while he tinkered quietly on WJ's energon converter. It wasn't much more complicated than the survivors' device, but it was larger and would be able to produce energon at a much higher rate.

"What if you go overseas?" Mikaela asked after looking up from her project, dreading the answer.
Ratchet mech-shrugged, optics focused on the device. "Then I go overseas."

Kass bit her lip and peered up at their mentor worriedly. "What about us?" she asked, not in concern for their wellbeing, obviously, but troubled about what they were supposed to be able to do without him. Mikaela shivered at the idea of being here without Ratchet nearby, the images of Hoist's near-death never far from her mind...

"You've progressed along enough that you can handle field dressings," Ratchet said simply, ignoring their distress. "That much should suffice."

Mikaela fought the swirling feeling of fear and unease in her gut. "What if it isn't enough?" she asked, putting aside her wire cutters. She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold.

Ratchet paused and glanced at her. His optics didn't reveal much of what he was feeling. "Then… we deal with it," he said, averting his gaze back to his work. "You two will be in charge of mech repairs regardless, because you're the most skilled medics that we can afford to remain here on the mainland. You are failing to realize that if you were not here to provide this service, then the mechs here would have no medical care at all."

There were reasons there were such few medics in the Autobot ranks; easy targets, they hadn't lasted long on the battlefields early in the war. The Decepticons had even fewer medics because, well, Mikaela really didn't find it surprising that the majority of mech doctors had chosen the side that didn't advocate major loss of life. After eons of fighting and being targets, there just weren't enough medics to really go around properly. Having human medics around would be a huge help on Earth, but although she knew that Ratchet was right, Mikaela still felt inadequate when she thought about how much she and Kass wouldn't be able to do compared to the likes of Ratchet or his previous assistant, First Aid.

"Don't look so grim," Ratchet chided, surprising her. He gave them both neutral looks. "You are both excellent workers, and have learned a lot. I have faith in you."

Mikaela figured that was probably the biggest compliment she could ever expect to get from Ratchet. She treasured it, also feared its timing. Kass turned pink and went back to work. Mikaela found herself staring at the rows of wires she had been supposed to cut and then put back together again in working condition—and didn't really have the strength to keep going with it. She knew her stuff very well now, enough to do the field dressings like Ratchet said.

That gave her little comfort when she dwelled on the idea of having to use those skills. She felt horribly inadequate and found it difficult to share that same faith in herself when she thought about how terribly alone she'd be with the responsibility to keep perhaps dozens of mechs online. She was grateful that Kass would probably be there, too.

At the end of their work shift, which ended three hours early because Ratchet had "other places to be," Mikaela wondered what she could do next that wouldn't involve bothering someone else who was busy. She looked over at Kass as they deposited their gear in their little human-sized closet area close to the door.

"So, where's Barns been lately?" she asked, kicking off her boots. She hadn't seen the brown haired man in a few days now.

Kass gently hung her apron on the wall. "He's… I don't know, actually," she said, frowning. She shrugged. "I think he's been spending most of his time in the computer room. But he's been so quiet since… for the last couple of days. Can't really blame him though."
Mikaela knew what Kass meant. Ever since Vortex had disappeared, Mikaela had seen how morose the remaining nine companions had become.

"How are you guys doing? Are you okay?" she asked as they exited the med-bay, their sneakers surprisingly loud compared to their work boots earlier.

Kass smiled, like always. "We're fine," she said. She chuckled a little as she waved politely at Mirage and Hound as they passed by, having to go single file when they passed the organics. "You can tell Sam that, too. I know he's been wanting to ask."

"Sam's been trying so hard to help," Mikaela murmured, uncomfortable at the mention of her boyfriend's trial and error process of reaching out to all of the survivors. They had managed to win Kass' good graces, but the others were more challenging. Sam was trying.

"I know." Kass smiled kindly at her. The reassurance seemed honest enough, so Mikaela believed her. "He has. All of you have."

While Mikaela didn't think it impossible they had managed to make the lives of the human survivors a little better simply by being available as spokespersons and confidants, aside from Kass she still doubted they'd made any real headway at becoming anything more than just acquaintances. Not for lack of trying, however. Sam was impatient, but dedicated, and finally had hit a point where he was more comfortable than awkward when talking with Danny and Barns. Miles, with his constant chatter and irrepressible good humor, was a huge help too; even Mikaela herself was won over by his antics. At least he wasn't being rude to her anymore. If anything, Miles had managed to knit together the remaining gaps in Kass and Sam's tentative friendship before making sure the British woman was his friend.

It was almost charming to see the blond teenager follow Kass around like a lost puppy, and Kass, clearly not ignorant of the situation, tolerated it with far more patience than Mikaela would have been able to manage. No one else had commented on the two of them, or Kass' indifference, but Mikaela thought it made the atmosphere on the compound just a little less dark. Sam had made jokes behind Miles' back, but seemed happy with it, especially since it was clear that Kass was mature enough to handle the situation without it adversely affecting her friendships with Mikaela and Sam.

Speaking of her wayward boyfriend…

Sam wasn't in the barracks when Mikaela went looking for him. One of the soldiers said he had gone to take a shower, so she had time to kill as she strolled around the compound. The air was freezing, forcing her to huddle in her worn-out parka and contemplate running out to the nearest town to pick up a new winter coat. It was almost mid-November now.

She thought about Christmas. With all of the moving around they were planning, NEST personnel were probably not going to set up any decorations in the cafeteria like they had last year. She had only intended to give Sam a gift (besides mailing a card to her father and grandmother), but she vaguely considered the idea of picking up gifts for Miles, Kass and the other human civilians.

She wondered if they had ever celebrated Christmas before. She doubted it; there wasn't much to give to others when they didn't have anything for themselves anyway.

Thoughts of the survivors were well placed when she walked in front of Hangar B, looking in through the door. She could see a few of the mechs all the way at the back of the hangar. Thundercracker was always easy to spot in the crowd, taller than even the crates that surrounded their camp. Kass had made noises about inviting Mikaela, Sam and Miles over to actually sit with her group after dinner one of these days, though that might have been a little too much—
Mikaela slowed to a stop when she saw Thundercracker pointedly waiting as a human approached the camp from the opposite side, toweling her hair. It was Rachel. Mikaela found herself staying still as she observed the interaction, heart racing irrationally. She had heard the human in question had been especially upset by Vortex's disappearance. Judging by Thundercracker's tense posture, a new altercation was about to take place.

"Rachel?" he called loudly enough to be heard across the hangar, causing the human to look up as she made a move to sit back down on her cot. Mikaela couldn't really see from her angle.

She tensed up immediately. "What?"

"Walk with me?" the jet asked, motioning with his hand back at the hangar bay door. Mikaela flattened herself against the side of the door, hoping not to interrupt anything with her presence.

A dark look flashed over Rachel's face and Mikaela was just as surprised as everyone else present when she stood up. "No." With that, Rachel ran straight at Thundercracker.

Thundercracker froze when she dashed between his legs, unable to stop her from running. "Rachel—" He didn't try to go after her once she dodged into one of the side offices, out of reach of mech interference. The jet rumbled lowly and Mikaela could see how his optics narrowed in frustration. "Slag."

"Just let her go…" Mikaela heard someone else say—Arcee, perhaps—but she didn't stick around to listen in to the rest of the conversation. She felt like she was violating their privacy just by standing there. It wasn't her business, even if she could pity them from a distance.

She found herself back outside of the barracks after nearly speed walking all the way there from the other hangar. She felt so out of place now. Shivering, Mikaela forced herself to keep walking past soldiers she did know, hoping to just make it inside and find Sam, if only to escape the growing sense of loneliness that was affecting her now—

"Mikaela!"

Freezing in her spot, Mikaela looked up and was relieved to see someone she trusted nearly as much as Sam. Bumblebee was walking up slowly, waving his hand slightly. She waved back briefly before sticking her hand back into her pocket to avoid the nipping cold.

"You look like you're about to ice over," Bumblebee said, teasing.

She laughed and shifted on her feet impatiently. "Yeah, yeah, well, some of us don't have extra internal heating components that we can just turn up when it's cold outside."

Bumblebee made another noise akin to a chuckle, before transforming into his alt-mode. The gleaming yellow Camaro was a comforting familiar sight.

"Don't ya know that night can be cold," the car crooned, popping a door open. "Come be with me."

Mikaela smiled despite her earlier dread and quickly crossed over to slide into the open door. The moment it shut, a blast of hot air greeted her and she melted in relief.

"Thanks, Bee," she said, looking at the dashboard.

"Not a problem." Bumblebee rolled up to park near the entrance of the hangar and seemed content to remain there. "Wait with me for Sam?"
Mikaela nodded, settling in the seat. "Sure."

The comforting warmth and the rumbling form beneath her threatened to lull her to sleep. She enjoyed the sense of being safe. Bumblebee was always so busy and would undoubtedly become busier as the war escalated. Even still, he sacrificed so much time to play guardian to Sam and Mikaela both, even if it was only Sam who was really a potential target.

Mikaela stared at the black dashboard with its silver accents, thinking. She thought about her old life, the one she had spent as "girl jewelry" for a strong man's arm. She hadn't realized how suffocated she'd been by that life, how she had ignored her own interests in order to play the role of worshipful trophy for Trent, and before him she'd done the same for Bryce and Travis and every other boyfriend she'd had. She'd thought so little of Sam, even if he had been naturally endearing from the start. He just hadn't seemed that important, hadn't demanded her attention the way other men in her life would have done. He was just too nice, and there were giant alien robots and evil government agents in competition for her attention.

But after Mission City, when they'd spent hours sitting around bored while the government agents figured out how to cover up everything that had happened, she'd gotten to know him better. And as they'd talked, she'd finally started to think about herself and what she wanted out of life. People talked about making decisions in the cold light of a new day, but she knew she'd done it while basking in the warmth of a new friendship. She'd made the choice—a real one, not forced—to break away completely from the life Mikaela Banes had always known—a deadbeat father, a record to haunt her, the abuse of and by men—and take on whole new life. And now she was realizing that this life would be scary and was filled with a million dangers, but it would also give her the chance to learn and grow and make friends and become someone worth knowing.

Quietly, she smiled at the realization.

"Bee?"

The Autobot hummed beneath her. "Hmm?" Even without seeing his face, Mikaela knew she had his complete attention, as always. Because Bumblebee was a good friend. Her best one, really.

"Thank you," she said, meaning it for a variety of reasons besides giving her a place to rest.

"For what?" Bumblebee asked, surprised.

"Meeting me," she said, resting her head on the car seat gently. She smiled at the dashboard. "Meeting Sam. Becoming our friend."

Because, she realized after battling all of that doubt all day, that in the light of all of the dangers this new life was giving her and her friends day after day, she didn't regret it. She didn't regret meeting Sam, or Bumblebee, or choosing to stay with them during the worst of times. And she didn't regret the choice she'd made later to stay friends with them and to become her own person.

This wasn't a life for the faint of heart, but Mikaela, for all of her previous faults, had never been one of those.

Bumblebee sat quietly for a moment before speaking. "I should thank you for that, too, Mikaela," he said gently.

Mikaela smiled as best she could at her friend. "Whatever happens..." she said, meaning it with all of her heart. "I'll never, ever regret going back with you."

Both in the industrial yard and at Mission City. All of her fear had been suffocating at both points,
but it hadn't mattered in the end. For the first time in her life, she had made the right choices, only to meet the best people she had ever known. She was involved in something that might get her or them killed... but that was tomorrow. Right now, they were okay, and so was she.

"I won't either," Bumblebee said, with enough emotion to know he was smiling back at her.

They settled down to wait for Sam and Mikaela felt safe. The three of them could handle anything, she decided, curling up. Anything at all.

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"WJ!"

WJ froze in the hallway and turned around in surprise to see Barnaby Rancourt rushing toward him. The human was clearly distressed, which was odd. Nothing else seemed wrong in the area and he didn't think the man was upset with him if he chose to run toward him.

"Mr. Rancourt?" WJ asked, startled.

Barns slid to a stop just a few yards in front of the Autobot, out of breath and clearly agitated about something. It wasn't drastic, however; he seemed merely eager to speak with WJ.

"I... I need to see your data charts again," the human said, accent thick. He stumbled slightly over the words, though that could have been because of his lack of breath. "I've been working on some things and it was too chaotic to talk about earlier, but could we...?"

The holo-map? WJ's earfins flashed brightly in confusion and concern. "Yes, of course," he said, immediately walking back toward the lab he had just left. Barns quickly fell into step with him. Suddenly curiosity flared up in WJ's processors. "What did you discover?"

Despite not having access to advanced technology, nor having the amount of processing power a mech might have, Barnaby was constantly surprising WJ with his intuitive intelligence. He just seemed to know where to look for things, which was why WJ was taking this very seriously.

"Nothing, yet. I hope... I hope nothing," Barns replied, shaking his head. He let WJ pick him up once they got to the lab and he stood nervously on the edge of the holo-map table as WJ set the data up correctly. "Please turn the gamma ray data back on. I need... to see something."

It didn't take long for WJ to return the holo-map settings to those he'd shown Barns a few days prior. The green data that corresponded with the gamma ray shifts that Perceptor and the humans had detected appeared in hologram form, hovering over Barns, who seemed to be seeking something in the data plot. WJ remained quiet, observing as the human became more anxious.

"What are the tinier markings?" Barns asked hurriedly, pointing not at the large green markers, but the small ones that dotted the map irregularly before and after the larger events. "More gamma ray shifts?"

WJ nodded, frowning behind his mask. "Yes. They are shifts that are barely large enough to be noticed by your satellites. They're most likely just incidental things. They are common in nature after all, and can be caused by lightning strikes or collision of accelerated electrons in high altitude electrostatic storms."

The curious look on the organic's face was fascinating and mildly concerning. "...But for them to be large enough to be noticed on the map," Barns murmured. He walked along the edge slowly before speaking again. "WJ... I don't suppose you have the data Jazz provided on drone sightings? I've
been trying to analyze it on my own, to avoid causing too much panic. I need to see your interpretation of it here, if that's available."

That would explain Ratchet's comment that Kass had complained to Mikaela about Barns' being reclusive. It would be easy to convert the data into holograms, but WJ immediately felt uneasy. "I do," he said, retrieving the files and preparing them for transfer. "Why?"

"Humor me," Barns said, grim. "Can you put that data up here like you have with the NEST security net data?"

"Certainly."

He wasn't expecting much; they had already checked out the locations of the drone sites that Jazz and Thundercracker had provided and nothing had come of it. But Barns was incredibly determined and WJ had to concede that there was no harm in trying to match the data up. He couldn't understand why Barns was so insistent on the gamma ray data, but—

WJ froze about the same time the transfer completed and the holo-map shifted, introducing the new data stream as white markers.

It… couldn't be.

It wasn't… couldn't… be possible they missed it. It was so obvious. How could… how could he have…?

Barns stood back, almost toppling over the edge of the table, trying to get a good look up at the holo-map. His organic optics grew abnormally round and his mouth hung open. Behind his mask, WJ also found it impossible to close the open-mouthed shock on his faceplates.

The gamma ray shift, represented in green, was the same as it had been. The only thing different was the addition of the white data markers for the fruitless drone data Jazz had provided. When NEST had investigated the locations, nearly every location by this point, they had found nothing out of the ordinary. They hadn't detected any Cybertronian signals or seen even a sign of Decepticon presence.

But floating freely in the air against the blue timeline, each green gamma ray origin point lined up almost perfectly with a white drone search point. The corresponding points hovered in mirrored stillness.

"Oh, my God," Barns whispered, echoing the horror that WJ was feeling pulse through his spark.

They were there.

_They were right there._

The drones… were already on Earth. Because this wasn't about what they could see. It was about what they had already detected through the invisible gamma ray shifts.

"You said… gamma ray shifts are more common… with…?" Barns managed to say, voice weak.

"Teleportation," WJ supplied, shaking. "They're teleporting in."

It made sense. It _all_ made sense. The blips weren't incidental. The gamma ray markers that remained noticeable compared to the huge shift the refugees had made weren't natural. They were markings of teleportation. The drones were being teleported to Earth, either through their own abilities, or by being transported by another Decepticon who could teleport. Like the Fallen.
There were hundreds of blips, registering in all different hemispheres, continents and countries. They had begun shortly after Mission City and had increased in frequency even after the survivors' arrival. They didn't match perfectly with the locations, but they were close, within ten miles of Jazz's old data. The data was only off, not entirely wrong. They had expected perfect symmetry, not suspecting mild irregularities in the timelines.

*Primus.*

"Oh, God," Barns said, whirling around with a panicked expression. "We need to get this to Prowl, now!"

WJ didn't need to be told twice. He held his hand out to collect the human before taking off toward the command center.

This changed *everything.*

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Things were moving, far faster than Thundercracker had expected. He wasn't sure if that was good or not, but it wasn't like he was calling the shots. He'd be there when they needed air support, providing backup to NEST and the Autobots. His actions in Los Angeles had granted him such immense support from NEST that only a day later he had been promoted to active duty by Keller.

All that they had to worry about now was, well, where everyone was going. Thundercracker did not like the idea of having to move around the globe for the sake of anyone, but it did please him to learn that Prowl had continued to honor his unsteady promise to keep their group together. Their six mechs would remain at Plumas, as would Thundercracker for the most part; they were to provide support for the North American continent.

Diego Garcia was finally ready, with all political lines and space issues finally resolved by a very impatient Agent Simmons. The British had made a fuss about not having any mechs on European soil yet, but it was finally all settled. Hound, Mirage, Cliffjumper, Sunstreaker, and Ironhide as acting commander would be moved to the island base within two weeks. They'd be dealing with any attacks on Asian soil, now that Russia and China had made a special agreement with the allied American forces to start up their own NEST-like operations to share access to Autobot soldiers.

By rights, Arcee should have been sent to the Chinese team, but nearly everyone in their group had staunchly refused the idea, including the normally cooperative Arcee. There were other Autobots who could make the trip and the language files were easy enough to transfer over. Thundercracker was pleased that NEST had not forced their hand in matters like that, not yet at least. Jazz told him Prowl was still looking out for their group's unity, but that could change at any time.

Speaking of the tactician…

Thundercracker wasn't exactly sure why Prowl had called for him specifically—and not Jazz—to meet at Hangar C for a special debriefing about the Los Angeles fight. While the burning hostility in his spark had faded much since meeting the Autobot leader months ago, Thundercracker was still uneasy at the thought of spending time alone with him. He knew Prowl wasn't trying to make it uncomfortable, either; the mech probably didn't know how to hold grudges, considering how illogical that was.

That said, Thundercracker reminded himself not to be a coward or a sparkling about the matter and to just go. It wasn't like he had much going for him in camp right now; Rachel was ignoring everyone in general and him specifically, which just added to the general air of depression that had
settled when they realized that Vortex was gone.

Prowl, as usual, just nodded at the jet when he approached him in the corridor that led to the storage bays that the mechs used as offices when necessary, and got straight to business without a single indication of awkwardness on his part. It was almost amusing. The only thing he did that surprised Thundercracker was that he *sat down* on one of the crates. So this was an informal debriefing after all.

"You were outstanding on the field," Prowl said right off the bat, surprising the jet again. He spoke to the point, though, so it wasn't about heaping on needless praise. "We should have employed your skills before. I drastically underestimated your potential."

Thundercracker… wasn't entirely sure he liked this line of conversation. It was better than a fistfight, he mused. "Thanks." He sat down slowly and eyed the mech warily. "I guess."

"You exposed your presence, however, so we will have to see what our enemies make of that. You mentioned that Soundwave had already identified you during the attack here, but this will confirm your presence, undoubtedly in two places at once," Prowl continued, a mix of wariness and an odd sort of loftiness to his tone. He looked to the side a moment, shaking his helm. "What Starscream and Galvatron must think…"

"Makes you want to be a fly on the wall, right?" Thundercracker asked, smirking.

Prowl hesitated and his doorwings twitched. Thundercracker belatedly wished he had stolen Jazz's information on what the little movements meant. "…I still fail to understand human metaphors, but I will have to agree with what it implies," Prowl said after a beat, vague amusement in his voice. It faded after that. "Regardless, I must thank you, on behalf of the entirety of the Autobot army and NEST, for your actions."

They kept *thanking* him, especially the human fliers when he had seen them later. Thundercracker hid a grimace. He sort of missed when they had feared and hated him. At least then they didn't bother him too much.

"Six Seekers aren't much," he warned, trying to direct the conversation away from himself. "If Galvatron has spent this much time being quiet and letting Starscream do his thing first, he must have a large number of soldiers accumulated by this point."

Prowl nodded stiffly. "Indeed. We must take that into account, plus the situation with *Nemesis*. We still have no knowledge of where it is located, if it is even on Earth presently."

Thuderocracker considered that for a moment. "I should have brought one of them in for interrogation. Apologies," he said roughly, realizing his mistake. None of the Seekers had survived —intentionally—but now he realized he probably could have captured one to interrogate.

Not that they had an interrogator on base anymore, a blast of horrible pessimism in his processors reminded him cruelly.

"Nonsense," Prowl said, so *practical* and sudden, it almost shocked Thundercracker. "You had your life and the lives of the Americans to be concerned with. Perhaps better planning in the future will help us capture one alive, but until we have proper aerial reinforcements of Autobot origins, I could not ask you to put yourself at more risk than we can afford."

Thundercracker stared at him. "Oh."

Sometimes, he forgot he was technically a member of the Autobots now. He forgot that their officers
actually gave two slags about their men, albeit as practically as possible. Prowl wasn't trying to be a sappy fool like Optimus, or hopelessly optimistic like Bluestreak was. He was just… nice.

Thundercracker was still unsure if he liked that.

But the thought of the Autobots reminded Thundercracker of what he'd wanted to speak to the tactician about from the start. He waited a moment in case Prowl started to move on to something else, but when he saw an opening to speak up, he took it.

"I heard something on their radio chatter," he said.

That immediately earned Prowl's attention. "Yes?" he asked. Then again, Prowl was always rather attentive. For all Thundercracker knew, the mech was bored.

Still, this was important. "…They said… not to hit the mechs," he said, remembering vaguely what he had heard before attacking the Decepticons. "Hit you Autobots, I mean, on the ground."

What flashed over Prowl's faceplates was not boredom, definitely. The tactician sat back, doorwings flaring. "What?" he asked, startled.

"The one literally said they weren't supposed to hit the Autobots," Thundercracker explained, shaking his helm. "Thought it was crazy their commanders told them that."

It was a strange order, now that Thundercracker took the time to consider it. After all, the whole point of this war was to kill each other. For Decepticons to be told not to attack Autobots was nothing short of shocking.

Prowl was visibly uneasy about that information as well. "…What… is that supposed to mean?" he asked, still confused, optics narrowing.

Thundercracker shook his helm. "I'm not sure. I never heard such an order in my time." Then again, was madness a constant thing? Galvatron could do anything at this point and they couldn't predict it.

For a moment, Thundercracker wasn't sure if Prowl was really paying this any heed. Maybe it was nothing to be concerned about tactically. But as the jet observed the black-and-white mech in front of him, he realized that Prowl was thinking about it. And judging by how severe the expression was on his faceplates, he had considered something Thundercracker hadn't.

"What?" the Seeker asked at length, now curious.

"It's odd…" Prowl murmured, not looking at the jet. He was staring off into the distance, optics still narrowed in concentration. "This is not the first time the Decepticons have avoided harming Autobots directly."

That wasn't true, not by Thundercracker's count. "Soundwave nearly decapitated Hoist though," he pointed out, frowning.

"But that was only when Hoist came close to actually getting within striking distance of Soundwave," Prowl corrected him, shaking his helm. "He did not fire as aggressively as a mech of his nature should have, normally would have."

Thundercracker hesitated. That was true, but… irrelevant. Or at least it should have been. So what, if Soundwave hadn't massacred the base like he could have? He had only come for the Shard and didn't need to wait around for NEST-1 to return.
But he… he had had the time to destroy the remaining Autobots. It wasn’t like they were beating him at that point. All he wanted was—

Was to destroy the Shard.

Not… kill the Autobots.

That was a tad bit alarming. Thundercracker realized in hindsight.

"And think of it," Prowl said, interrupting that line of bewildering thought. "When NEST-1 was in the air on the way to Newfoundland, surely the Seekers would not have avoided such a clear shot at taking out so many Autobots at once, including the Prime."

"They did kill Prime in Mexico though," Thundercracker said, processors beginning to heat up as he tried to think of a logical answer to this.

…Why weren't the Decepticons trying to kill them?

Prowl finally looked back at the jet, optics hard. "Only him," he said. "Ratchet said it was odd, how the Seekers were merely toying with them, right up until the point when Scorponok took out Optimus. And then they all left." His doorwings trembled slightly. "He was the only target."

Thundercracker wondered if he was gawking. "…But the rest of you… aren't?" he asked, now utterly confused. None of this made sense.

"No," Prowl replied, now a visibly a little alarmed, which spoke volumes of his true emotions no doubt. "Why? Why now? What is their goal here, to only disable us, or to cause chaos in the ranks?"

"They're aiming for disorientation. The breakdown of your army," the Seeker replied, going on what little he did know of their enemy's movement, the parts that made sense. "Attacking the humans in sparse amounts serves to divide and conquer, if anything. Splitting up your forces leaves you weak."

That made splitting up bases sound even more suicidal now.

"But why wait to kill us after so many other potential opportunities?" Prowl asked, optics narrowing even more.

At that, Thundercracker was utterly lost. "I don't know," he said, shaking his helm again.

Despite not knowing anything about it either, Prowl was clearly determined to figure it out. "They have a plan, one that includes us being alive," he said lowly. "Why?"

Thundercracker had no answers. "Perhaps we should consult the others," he said, though he knew none of the other Autobots or mechs from his group would have any better idea.

Prowl nodded, sighing heavily suddenly. "Yes. Don't mention this to the humans yet, however," he warned, frowning more. "I don't want to alarm them unnecessarily without further discourse. Keller's health is rapidly deteriorating from Ratchet's observations. I do hope he sees the sense in stepping down soon from his position."

Keller had suffered a mild heart attack a few days previously, and had undergone an emergency angioplasty. According to his doctors, the white-haired human would have a relatively easy recovery if he would resign from his position and just take the time he needed to heal, but he refused to resign, worried that a change in leadership at the last minute would upset all of their plans for how to deploy NEST and counter the Decepticons. He had seen him on the vid screen when he was "promoted" to active duty, and how he was even alive was a miracle from Thundercracker's point of view. Prowl's
concern for him was a bit unexpected, though.

"I'm surprised you tolerate any of the humans," the jet said, only partially teasing.

Prowl arched an optic ridge at him, unperturbed by the barb. "They have their moments," he admitted.

Thundercracker rumbled lowly in laughter. He did like the tactician; he couldn't deny it. He was a mech after his own spark, in both wit and rational behavior.

After so many months of harboring intense dislike—even hatred—for a mech he barely knew, it felt ridiculous. Thundercracker had always been the one to resolve issues of jealousy in his trine. To be jealous about Prowl had made sense for a brief amount of time when he wasn't sure of Prowl's intentions or personality.

Now, Thundercracker knew. Prowl was an intelligent, professional, and probably more self-sacrificing mech than Thundercracker had met in a long fragging time. Prowl had every reason to hate Thundercracker, and even Jazz, but he didn't, at least not in a way that interfered with their duties. Prowl was almost unnaturally immaculate, from his manners to handsome framework—

Thundercracker stopped.

…He was so not going there.

"Are you alright?" Prowl asked, noticing the staring.

"Yes. I'm fine," Thundercracker replied, immediate and obvious. He averted his gaze before looking back at Prowl, forcing himself to do so. He also had to physically lock down his wing joints to keep them from twitching. "It's fine. What were you saying?"

Prowl stared at him. Thundercracker stared back, ignoring how his processors were burning in embarrassment. If Prowl had eyebrows, he probably would have been raising them.

"I…" the tactician began, before stopping, almost physically twisting in his seat. "What was that?"

Thundercracker frowned, glad for the distraction. "What was what?" he asked, peering around. They were the only ones there.

Prowl stood up and seemed to be trying to hunt down the location of something nearby. "Did you just hear someone—?" he began to ask.

"PROWL!"

That time, both mechs jumped and turned to the hallway. Thundercracker saw WJ rushing toward them in a near run. It wasn't the mech who had shouted, however; it had been the human in his cupped hands. That's what made Thundercracker so alarmed.

"Barns?" Thundercracker stood and moved closer immediately. He did not like seeing the young man upset, let alone upset within the clutches of—WJ. He held his hands out expectantly, but Barns didn't budge from the other's hands. "What's wrong?"

"We found them," WJ said, shocking both Prowl and Thundercracker. "We found the drones!"

Prowl froze, his doorwings going up so sharply it had to have been painful. Thundercracker found himself gazing into WJ's optics for the first time without fear of the mech. He was suddenly
overcome with so many emotions—elation, confusion—hope.

They found them?

"We made a mistake, Prowl," Barns said in a trembling voice, both he and WJ looking terrified.

"Where are they?" Prowl asked, voice steady despite his posture.

WJ shook his head. "They're exactly where we thought they were," he said, sounding anguished. "Primus, we need to act on this now. There is no telling where they could have migrated, or if they're in hibernation, or—!"

Thundercracker glanced down and exchanged a quick look with the tactician. Prowl's doorwings quivered, but his faceplates were, as always, as tranquil as a lake.

"I will call the Director. Prepare for a sit-rep in less than a joor."

End Chapter 32.

Chapter End Notes

Time for SCIENCE. And Vortex making very poor choices in occupational plans.

A/Ns:
- TC what are you doing (are you seeing a pattern here yet?)
- Seriously, how the heck is Keller alive? Maybe he's a robot, too.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Vortex tries to do politics, the grown-ups do some science, and Rachel… has a proposition. Many thanks, Shantastic! :)

**Warnings**: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

**Disclaimer**: *Transformers* © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**Decepticon Stronghold**

**Earth**

The Decepticons lived up to their ill-translated name in many ways that Vortex had never bothered to notice before. Megatron had been a genius at using words to manipulate the thoughts and actions of others. Starscream and other politically adept mechs had also either been sparked with or had acquired this skill, which had allowed them to climb the ranks and take positions of power within the Decepticon army. Eventually every mech that wanted to stay online learned how to twist the truth in his own favor, out of self-defense. As a united force, they had also developed other, far more insidious ways to obscure the truth. One of these tricks had been used to hide Galvatron this whole time.

There were many regions of the Earth where the humans would never think of looking for mechs, because they were uninhabitable by most organic life. Even if they did consider it, it wasn't like they had the ability to do a thorough search. Earth had far too many nooks and crannies, ecosystems of all sorts, which would hide even a Decepticon shuttle with minimal shielding or camouflage from satellites or military search parties.

After the situation with Megatron's entrapment in ice, the humans had considered the idea that the Decepticons might seek out the ice as a haven, and had thrown the concept away, out of ignorance. An ignorance that the Autobots, for some reason, had not challenged. The humans didn't realize that mechs could survive well below Earth freezing temperatures when they were prepared for it, the way that space faring mechs like Megatron had been. It had been Megatron's own failure plus the combined effects of the magnetism of the poles that had dragged him down. The ice of Earth was *nothing* compared to the frigid coldness of space.

Using human ignorance and Autobot laxness to their advantage, the Decepticons had chosen the frigid cold of the Siberian tundra as their central base of operations on Earth, selecting a site near a lake high in the mountainous central region. The shuttle Starscream's initial team had used, quite like the *Ark*, had been stored there, using complex energy screens and the vast mountain network to shield its presence from both satellites and any unlikely human observation.

Vortex, despite being stuck between two larger fliers each equipped with more weapons than he had, felt a hysterical twinge of nostalgia when they landed. *At least I'm back in Europe.*

They marched across the frozen ground. Vortex was entranced by the whiteness of it all; their snow
had always been gray, or tinted brown, but he didn't have long to look at the environment. They pushed him roughly ahead and boarded the shuttle quickly. The air was stale and the first corridor was as quiet as a tomb, but there was movement to the air. There were other mechs nearby, according to his scanners. Vortex wondered if he knew any of the mechs there. He hoped not.

Having seen the reaction that the humans generally had when first seeing his and Thundercracker's size, Vortex felt that Cybertronian ships would boggle their minds when they were finally seen. They were very large, and even shuttles generally required that a lift be taken to reach the main level, and this was no exception. Vortex wished he could have pressed against the back of the lift wall for simple support, but he was flanked by his two guards at all times.

As they moved upwards, Vortex glanced between the two mechs with him. There was barely enough room for even the smallest of the fliers to fit in the lift with the three of them.

"Where is Nemesis? I thought Lord Galvatron would be aboard the ship in order to attack the humans," he said. The one to his right growled lowly at the question.

"Nemesis ain't even on Earth yet," the brown flier said. "We're stuck in this fragging shuttle while Cyclonus and his troops get to hang back in that asteroid field 'til Lord Galvatron says it's okay to move in. Fragging stupid, if ya ask me."

"No one did, you idiot!" the other guard snarled, radiating danger enough that Vortex edged back a bit to give him room to strike the first guard and not him. "Shut your vocalizer off!"

Nemesis was in an asteroid field? That would place it just beyond Mars. It made sense, but why the waiting… Vortex asked nothing else and kept his visor to the door. It opened up to a small alcove that led out to the command center, as he had expected.

The command center was packed with probably the majority of the shuttle's crew. The room was more akin to a meeting hall than a true strategy or command center. But that was how Decepticon ships carrying Megatron had always been built. He wanted an audience at all times, to be surrounded by his loyal subjects within his throne room, so the centers of the vessels were always built with a court in mind. Vortex felt uneasy walking into the room regardless. It all felt alien. It lacked the natural touch of Earth. It was all shiny blue-gray metal that intimidated instead of welcomed.

Optics of nearby mechs focused on him and Vortex ignored them. He was looking around as much as he could without seeming too nervous for their grand host. He knew Galvatron would not be able to resist a doppelganger of one of his Gestalt teams wandering about on Earth. One of the many reasons it was Vortex standing there, he mused, instead of one of his better companions.

The anxiety of waiting in silence for the ship's master to appear was relieved slightly when Vortex saw a particular mech walk through the crowd directly toward him. Vortex was grateful he kept his mask up, at least for now, because he almost wanted to smirk.

Starscream, just as huge and sneering as ever, stepped up to the helicopter with a smile that seemed out of place. Vortex braced himself.

"Well, well, if it isn't the mysterious doppelganger," the Seeker began, his iconic screechy voice at a falsely neutral level, barely traveling beyond the two of them. He had the nerve to seem politely interested.

Vortex peered up into the Decepticon Aerial Commander's faceplates. He knew it was the same mech he had known in his own world; the same sneer, the same arrogant swagger.
"Lord Starscream," he replied, gauging the other mech carefully, not ignoring the other Seeker he had trailing him.

What was notable was the absence of both Thundercracker and Skywarp. Vortex was glad. He would not have been able to deal with Thundercracker's double. Perhaps they had been killed in the earlier fighting. That actually would be a benefit.

"You are a curious case, aren't you?" Starscream asked airily. His optics raked over Vortex's frame with mock interest. Obviously, the story had spread since Vortex's capture. "I'm sure you have such a fascinating story to share. Granted you aren't the real Vortex, or else you'd be a deserter."

Vortex willed himself to ignore the veiled threat. "I am the real Vortex, one of two," he said shortly. He had no time for Starscream—at least not yet. He looked beyond the flier across the rest of the room. "Where is Lord Galvatron?" There was no trace of the purple lunatic.

Starscream dropped the feigned politeness and made a revealing expression of disgust. "Ugh. He'll be along," he said. He motioned sharply at the helicopter, optics narrowed dangerously. "And you will address me properly, mech."

One of his propellers twitched. "...yes, sir." Oh, he was going to enjoy the second part of his mission.

The aerial commander opened his mouth to speak again, but the sound of mech feet scraping loudly on the floor caught both Starscream and Vortex's attentions. Vortex wasn't able to see much further ahead in the crowded hall, with several taller mechs blocking his way, but he got a clear view of Starscream's expression. The Seeker's lips curled back into a snarl that was forcefully hidden as the jet took several steps back, standing rigidly to the side as mechs scrambled behind him.

Turning his helm, Vortex saw the sea of mechs disperse in a mix of panic and unease. He didn't have to guess why. The moment the wall of armor vanished, Vortex could see directly down the center of the command room. There was a command chair—a throne—just before the upper levels started. Vortex watched with muted feeling as a single, boldly painted mech started down the stairs to the lower platform.

"Hail, Galvatron!" the chorus of voices rang out around him, shattering any illusion of calm he could have had.

Vortex desperately tried to hide the shudder that went through his frame when he saw the tyrant enter his direct line of sight, purple armor gleaming like sickness incarnate.

He thought of Onslaught. Of Swindle. Brawl, Blast Off—all of them. He thought of their faces. Their ruined faces, the charred remains of their spark chambers.

He thought of Wheeljack, of Goddard, torn to pieces after making sacrifices to save their friends, to save Vortex. He thought of how much more they had to lose. How much Galvatron had taken from them.

Vortex's snarl caught up with a harsh engine whine; his systems choked with grief—and rage. So much rage. He watched as Galvatron sat down on his throne, smug smirk on his white faceplates, and all Vortex wanted to do was forget their plans and just kill the fragger now. He wanted to bathe in Galvatron's energon. He wanted to tear his spark in half, into enough pieces to make up for the loss of his gestalt, his brothers, his family—

Vortex was going to fucking kill him.
One of his guards behind him shook him from those dark promises by shoving him forward. Vortex let himself be pushed to his knees before his nemesis. The hurried instructions his ally had offered him joors ago resounded in his processors loudly.

This needed patience. This needed sanity. Vortex clenched his fists and held back his raw anger. Vengeance was not why he was there. That... that could wait.

For now, Vortex hung his helm and showed a submissiveness that Galvatron, in all of his horrid existence, didn't deserve. In an act that made him feel weak, he retracted his mask. He had to show he had no secrets.

"My Lord," the helicopter said into the silent air of the hall. His voice barely shook. He stared at the metallic floor. He prayed for strength.

This could not fail.

Galvatron was quiet at first. Vortex didn't look up until after several minutes had passed. Galvatron was just... watching him. No one else dared to speak; there was nothing else to hear except the sound of wind bravely and uselessly attacking the exterior of the ship. When Galvatron did finally speak, Vortex fought a wince.

"You... you are the would-be deserter." Galvatron smirked, the white metal twisting with dark intent. "Fascinating."

This was it. Vortex focused on his interrogator training, completed mega-vorns ago, and forced online his manipulation protocols. They had been ill used in all of the years he had been on Earth. Now, he wasn't interrogating, however; he had to make sure Galvatron thought he was doing the exact opposite. He was the victim of questioning; he was the one who was forced to bare all.

"Negative, my Lord. I have never deserted the Decepticon cause." Vortex braced himself—spark and all—and lifted his gaze long enough to meet Galvatron's head-on, to make sure the warlord was truly listening. "I am Vortex of Bruticus, but I am not the Vortex of this time."

Galvatron stared at him. "...What?" he asked, humor almost vanishing.

Vortex sank his servos into the floor, almost rippling the metal sheets. "I have come from a future, one in 2054 by human calendars," he answered.

The smirk on Galvatron's face grew two-fold. Around them, the mechs present murmured, mostly jeers. Vortex heard Starscream made a sound of disgust. Vortex kept his visor on Galvatron and steadied himself. He knew that the story would be questioned regardless of where they were.

"I am a survivor of the war, which spiraled out of all of our control," he continued, preparing for the backlash. "Even yours, Lord Galvatron."

The notion of time travel was, as expected, thrown out the window when Galvatron's part of the story was brought up. His reputation and power insulted, the tyrant immediately snarled, slamming his fist onto his throne's arm.

"Out of my control! ?" he bellowed, the spontaneous rage something Vortex had been warned about, but it still made him cringe.

Vortex bowed his head, forcing himself to keep his hands on the ground flat in submissiveness. "I am sorry, Lord, but that is what happened. It was a disaster, but not by your hands." He dared to look up, hoping his anger was believable. It wasn't hard to get angry then, but not for the reasons he
hoped Galvatron believed. "By our enemies' Prime, and all of his blind followers."

The mention of the fallen Autobot leader made Galvatron's glare intense. He didn't lash out however, and Vortex dared to relax minutely when Galvatron sat back further against his throne, still radiating danger.

"You expect me to believe you?" the warlord spat.

"I have nothing but my word, my Lord," Vortex said, gesturing slowly at his chassis, "but if you would look closer at my presence, or perhaps the presence of the Seeker who also came with me from my original time, I do have evidence."

There was a murmur to the side, where Starscream was standing, but Galvatron ignored the Decepticons present. "What Seeker?" he demanded impatiently.

"Thundercracker of Commander Starscream's elite trine." Vortex held back a grimace at the idea of bringing one of his own into this, but for now, Thundercracker was his ace. "Surely during the attack on Plumas base, where I was trapped under this Prime's orders, Soundwave noted Seeker Thundercracker's presence."

That was their biggest gamble, using the attack for a reference as evidence that Vortex's story was true. It was one of the few times Vortex at least knew of where the duplicates had been noticed. Whether or not Soundwave had actually told Galvatron what he had seen wasn't difficult to guess, but the reaction they'd get from it was the real risk.

His answer had given everyone pause. Galvatron stared at Vortex in a moment of speechlessness, undoubtedly struggling and failing to find a way to break the evidence down on his own. Vortex was impressed he hadn't just taken a plasma canon to Vortex to make it simpler. Perhaps that meant the tyrant was saner than expected.

Vortex dared to look to the side at the remaining Seekers present. Starscream, for all of his arrogance, looked… stricken. Vortex knew then that his trine was gone. He pushed the image of a dead Thundercracker out of his mind; he felt no sympathy toward Starscream's losses.

Earth took from all of them. They'd all see it in time, no matter what happened at the end of this Primus forsaken war.

Galvatron finally stopped staring at Vortex long enough to sneer. "…A misidentification, I was told," he said at length, still impatient and now uneasy. He looked sharply to the side. "Isn't that right, Soundwave?"

Soundwave was still standing like an impassive stone statue to Galvatron's left. Vortex felt exposed as Soundwave slowly turned back and looked at Vortex with a judging, concealed expression. Anything could have been lurking behind his blank visor, his battle mask.


Galvatron roared again and slammed his fist into his chair. "What is the meaning of this? !" he bellowed, standing with violence promised in his posture.

Vortex sank down lower in unfeigned fear. "It is as I said, Lord Galvatron," he said quickly. "I am
from the future, as was Thundercracker. He is… Neutral, now, sir. I am not." He paused, took a mental breath, and continued with fervor, "I have no intention of betraying the Decepticon name, nor you, my Lord."

"What occurred to have ended the war, then?" Starscream asked lowly, edging along the side up toward the front of the room. He eyed Vortex with increased suspicion.

"…We are still unsure," Vortex offered after hesitating a moment. "Even the Autobots, the few I did encounter who provided me with means of survival I regretfully acknowledge using, had no definitive answer." He looked to Galvatron. "Creatures that both sides lacked knowledge of quickly overtook our forces."

Galvatron's dark glare made him want to run the other way. "Yes?" the tyrant demanded, a snarl in the back of his voice.

"The drones." Vortex tried to keep the tremor in his limbs muted, even as he stared down the larger mech. This… this was one of the few ploys even Vortex didn't doubt would raise a reaction. "They were called… the drones."

While most of the room remained oblivious, Vortex kept his focus on Galvatron. He waited for an outburst of anger, or suspicion—perhaps even a positive one, where Galvatron would acknowledge Vortex's information as proof of his story.

But Galvatron did not lash out. He stared at Vortex in silence. It spoke volumes, however, and Vortex carefully kept his smirk off of his exposed faceplates. The tyrant said nothing, but his red optics betrayed the fact he knew what they were. He recognized the word—drones. He knew what they were, and probably where they came from.

There was no way Galvatron wasn't making plans for them, then. Vortex felt ill at ease with this knowledge, but he was grateful they now could confirm this threat. He hoped it was early yet. He didn't trust Galvatron's calm.

But the momentary flash of apprehension in Galvatron's optics did not slip his notice either.

Vortex raised a closed fist to his chest. "My lord, I am telling you the truth. I finally was able to escape the Autobots when Prime fell. I was unable to get into contact with any Decepticons until recently," he said, treading just barely on the edges of desperation and honesty. He bowed his head lowly. "I am grateful to be in your presence once more, Lord Galvatron, and I humbly ask that you accept my request to rejoin the Decepticons to get the revenge I crave against the Autobots."

On the inside, Vortex's spark burned with dark hatred. If Galvatron said yes, he was certain he would suffer a processor glitch.

_I will never join you, you hideous monster._ Even if it took him to the end of his own life, Vortex would dance on Galvatron's grave.

Luckily, Galvatron did not say yes. His silence had evolved into quiet contemplation. He stared at the helicopter with a hungry look that made Vortex shudder. He did his best to keep calm and avoid direct eye contact. He stared at Galvatron's feet, spark flaring with nervousness.

This had to work.

"Soundwave!" Galvatron barked, making Vortex nearly jump.

He turned and found himself staring down Soundwave's intense red stare from next to Galvatron's
side.

Oh, Primus.

They had seen this coming, but it had been one of the worst-case scenarios. One of the lesser devastating, but still potentially lethal scenarios. For Vortex at least.

"Hack him," Galvatron said, footsteps like firing cannons as he marched back to his seat. He threw himself into his chair, grinning maliciously. "I want to know for sure he's what he claims to be."

Vortex glanced up again and saw Soundwave walking toward him slowly. Oh, Primus. Oh, shit. Vortex drew back as much as he dared and realized that unless he said something to distract Galvatron's attention, there was no way out of this. He'd just be killed if he avoided Soundwave's touch or got the telepath to stop.

We need this to work, Soundwave can't read my thoughts now—

And then, by a miracle of Primus, an explosion rocked the ship. Galvatron snarled loudly, standing again despite how the shuttle shifted and the Decepticons around them leaped up for a fight. The whole vessel creaked and the sound of residual explosions beneath the hull echoed across the interior.

Vortex gladly slid his mask closed, knowing it would be interpreted as a part of his battle readiness protocols, and hid a grateful smile behind his mask; his allies were still holding up their end of the deal. He hoped the one on the outside could move faster than the Decepticons, who quickly scrambled to find their attackers. He forced himself to remain kneeling, however, as he gazed upwards in feigned surprised.

Humans thought they had a monopoly over acting; they had obviously never met the Decepticon Army's most infamous interrogator.

"What's happening?" he demanded, loud enough that other Decepticons looked his way, but not enough to attract Galvatron's already building anger.

Act confused. Be guarded, but concerned. Be innocent. That in particular was a hard to fake expression for a Decepticon, so he hoped his impression was believable. If he ever got the chance, he would thank Danny for inspring his performance—

Everything stopped when Galvatron suddenly turned around in mid-stride towards the door and cast his gaze upon the kneeling mech in the center of the room. Under his attention, Vortex felt terrified.

"You!" Galvatron snarled, closing the distance between them all too fast, everything around them blurring into unimportant background noise.

Vortex couldn't help but fly back in fear as the tyrant fell upon him. He felt the massive clawed hands wrap around his neck—and then he was hauled into the air like a rag doll.

"Is this your doing?" Galvatron shouted, shaking the smaller rotorcraft viciously. Vortex could feel his neck strut strain under the pressure and several hoses were sliced. "Miserable traitor—!"

Vortex fought a wave of terror as the claws tightened and tore at his neck. "'N-no, my lord!" he stammered quickly, forcing himself not to grab at the offending hands lifting him, showing absolute submission. "I know nothing!"

There was a flash of something—madness, something deeper—in Galvatron's blood red optics. It
made Vortex's energon run cold. There was a touch of death, or worse things, to his gaze. Whatever this monster was, Vortex couldn't believe it was a mech. It had no spark.

With another howl of rage, Galvatron moved. He threw Vortex to the ground, sending the dark mech skidding across the metal floor. The impact jarred his processors and shorted his vision momentarily. Vortex felt pieces tear off his armor as he tumbled. When he stopped, he remained where he fell, spark pulsing wildly in apprehension. He saw Galvatron moving and he was flooded with the fear that the tyrant would simply take his cannon and obliterate Vortex right there on the spot—

"Dirge!" Galvatron bellowed over the noise of the alarm. He gestured violently at Vortex on the floor, "Take this wretch to the brig, and then go find the Autobot scum who dared to attack my ship!"

In a fit of violence, Galvatron whipped around and blasted the intercom blaring the warning bell out of existence with his transformed canon. Vortex winced and ducked low as Galvatron marched past him, waves of anger washing off of his EM field. The helicopter didn't have much time to cower on the floor; rough hands grabbed hold of his shoulder plates, indifferently jarring his propellers. Vortex fought his instinct to fight back. He let Dirge haul him up and snarl at him to hurry up as they headed through the chaos toward the doors.

This could have been so much worse.

He saw Soundwave watching him from the corner and he quickly averted his gaze, nearly tripping as the taller flier in front of him dragged him along. Yes, that could have been much worse.

The shuttle was big, so it took them longer to get to the brig than Vortex had expected. He tried to observe the layout of the corridors the best he could without being obvious as Dirge dragged him down. He didn't resist, even though his self-preservation instincts made him want to break away and get out of there. He had no guarantee that the plan would work; he could be trapped, enclosed there, for a long time. Or executed in a matter of cycles.

They needed time. Perhaps a few days, though his allies had hoped for longer. It needed time to blossom, their plan. Vortex prayed he'd make it through just the first few hours.

Dirge all but threw him into his cell, which was closest to the single entrance to the brig. Vortex stumbled and barely had enough time to take in his surroundings before the lights went out in an attempt to save power on the hidden vessel. Dirge left without a word, obviously called out to handle the problem outside, but Vortex knew the trouble had long gone.

From here on out, he was alone.

In the confines of the darkened brig, Vortex found himself cycling air faster to cool his overheated systems. The whole complex seemed still now without the alarm and he couldn't hear anything but his own systems. Slowly, he felt the pent up energy in his limbs die away as he leaned back against the wall. Behind his mask, Vortex dared to smile.

He was in.

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Plumas NEST Base
California, United States

Barns was not a true scientist, nor did he think he was suited to set strategy in the course of their inter-species war. He was a young man who just so happened to know a little bit about science and
little bit about the situation at hand, namely, the drones. He hadn't thought anyone would pay him much attention during the whole information exchange. He had done his part by alerting WJ to his theories, and he expected that WJ would explain the data and its significance to Prowl and the rest of the Autobots.

However, it seemed that the senior members of NEST had a different idea. Prowl requested his presence as part of the briefing, and Barns agreed to accompany Jazz and Arcee back to the other hangar where NEST and the Autobots would decide what to do with the information they now had. How he ended up as the person with the microphone, he didn't know. And when a variety of eyes and optics—including those of a clearly very ill Director Keller from the video screen—were suddenly on him, Barns felt for the first time in his life momentary stage fright.

WJ was thankfully standing there beside him with the newly moved holo-table, but the scientist also had turned to look at Barns, as if Barns was the lead scientist here. The Frenchman fidgeted nervously on the catwalk, keenly aware of the twenty senior NEST officers ranged around him on the catwalk. When he glanced to his left, he saw Major Lennox and Agent Simmons staring him down. Epps gave him a covert thumbs-up from his position behind Major Lennox.

They were, apparently, waiting for the last person to show up, who turned out to be Thundercracker. Barns cleared his throat quietly and tried not to look anywhere in particular. Jazz smiled at him kindly when they made eye contact, but Barns could only fight against the overwhelming sense of pressure hanging over him.

"Alright," Simmons began, voice shattering the silence as he gazed around the room, focusing on WJ for once. "Care to enlighten us to the situation? What's all this about new information?"

WJ nodded and proceeded with the conversation. "Jazz's information on the location of the drones was very close to accurate, but we miscalculated the chance that those locations would match his identically," he began. He pulled up the data on the holo-table and everyone stared at it with varying expressions of surprise. "We made the first mistake with the loss of Shard by anticipating a total change in our world. We then made the reverse mistake in our search for the drones, by anticipating a completely identical world. We completely disregarded the minute changes that have occurred to the timelines, both before and after the arrival of our friends, here. Some things, no matter how small, have still changed."

"Such as the locations?" Lennox asked, frowning. "But we already knew they weren't the same…"

"No, when we looked for the drones at the locations that Jazz and Thundercracker gave us, we didn't find them. Therefore we posited that their arrival locations would be totally different since they clearly weren't the same exact places as they had been in Jazz's time," WJ replied, shaking his helm gravely. He and Barns exchanged a quick look. "But the truth is, according to our records, the drones landed in areas very close to the predicted drone locations, but you didn't find them because they weren't on top of the locations exactly."

"We've already looked all over those places," Ironhide interrupted. He didn't sound happy, but he rarely ever did. The others shared his incredulous expression, however.

Barns jumped in, mostly out of habit. "No, no, you only looked within a certain radius of each location. You must remember the difficulties of teleportation," he said. He froze when everyone stared at him again. He cleared his throat nervously.

"To assume that the exact coordinates would be used in our world as they had been in yours was folly," WJ added helpfully.
"Minute changes. They can make the difference," Barns continued. He felt better once he got started again. "We've taken Jazz's coordinates and placed them alongside a map of the gamma ray bursts picked up by NASA over the last few months."

He leaned over the railing and peered at the holo-table, which WJ adjusted accordingly. The gamma ray burst markers lay almost over Jazz's drone locations—just close enough to mean something, but far enough away that it explained their lack of findings.

"As you can see, the locations are close, but not identical," WJ said. "I believe that because of the minute changes, the drones are simply located just outside the search area we had chosen before, but the gamma rays will lead us to them regardless."

"Gamma rays?" Simmons suddenly interrupted, looking baffled, though he probably knew what they were, unlike Epps and Lennox who just looked confused over the term itself. "What do they have to do with anything?"

"Gamma ray bursts are an associated by-product of teleportation," Barns explained, glancing over at Jazz and Thundercracker, the two friendly faces in the crowd. "That is how WJ—er, we—picked up the trend. Our own appearance here was signaled by both a large gamma ray burst and by NEST's security alert." He pointed at the map for proof.

Stepping forward, WJ shook his helm again. "The gamma ray bursts aren't stopping either. They come in small numbers, but they are increasing, Prowl," he said. Every mech and NEST official seemed to wilt under that information. "They're being transported to Earth in small batches to avoid detection, but if we don't move against them soon, we won't stand a chance when they finally do move."

Prowl stared at the holo-table, taking in the information silently. His doorwings twitched, and from what Barns had experienced with Bluestreak, it must have meant he was bothered by it all.

"...Primus..." Jazz muttered, looking vaguely horrified. Lennox ran a heavy hand over his face and Keller's face remained staunch and dark.

"We have the proof of your arrival, Jazz and Thundercracker. The time and location of the gamma ray bursts aligns too perfectly with the NEST security information to be misinterpreted!" WJ tilted his helm, looking particularly at Keller. Something flashed up beside the video feed and Barns could see a map of what seemed to be the Atlantic Ocean. "Compare that to this other reading taken over the Laurentian Abyss, caught by satellite. That is where the Fallen teleported, yes? Well, there is a slightly larger gamma ray reading here than there should be."

He pointed down at the holo-table and brought up new data, with similar gamma ray markers. Barns swallowed hard at the inclusion of the larger marker, which clearly was meant to represent the Fallen on the time line.

All of this seemed to take their audience by even more surprise. The humans all looked pale.

"...how did we miss this?" Ratchet asked, stunned. None of the officers seemed to know either.

"We all missed it," Barns said, frowning. He glanced over at Prowl. "This also proves that there were scientists who came before us, but that is unimportant compared to the issue of handling the drones."

"There are several locations in North America. There are many more in Europe and Asia, and a few in Africa and South America," WJ leaned on the holo-table. "We must act, now, my friends," he
said, ear-fins glowing lowly.

Barns wasn’t sure who would be the one to make the call. The officers all looked at each other; Keller said nothing, simply looking yet another few years older.

"...Yes. We must," Prowl said, speaking up apparently for everyone, because Keller nodded and Lennox also agreed. "We will move out in scouting teams to the closest locations. We should prepare the teams within the next twenty four hours."

"We'll be ready," Lennox said, speaking for the human military.

"There are five within the boundaries of the continental United States. They're a start," WJ offered. He brought up a map of the United States on the holo-table, the mountainous terrain of the West coast glowed green. "One in upstate Oregon, two on the East coast, one in Texas, and another in Montana. There were smaller blips closer to Plumas and in Canada, but the larger ones held the most promise."

"And if we confirm they are there, naturally we must confront them before they become too large of a swarm," Barns added. He gripped the railing tightly. "With the Decepticons beginning their assault in calculated minor incidents, we can only surmise they are biding their time until the drones are ready."

"Well, we just gotta be more ready, then, huh?" Epps said, trying to sound positive. No one could really pick up the energy to aggressively challenge the difficult task that lay before them.

The military moved. Barns stood back willingly as NEST took over and began the tedious task of organizing a new search, this one far wider in range and with far more participants. WJ glanced his way as he stepped back to let Ratchet and Ironhide observe the data on the holo-table. The scientist's dim earfins revealed his frown beneath the mask. Barns could only mirror the gesture as he turned to get down from the catwalk.

"It don't make sense," Jazz said suddenly.

"What doesn't?" Thundercracker asked. Barns slowed and stared down at his two friends, Prowl and WJ also listening in curiously.

The silver saboteur hesitated visibly. "If they're only arrivin' in small numbers… how did so many take over Earth?" he asked. He glanced around him in alarm.

It was a difficult question to even fathom, let alone answer. Barns shook his head; he didn't know. He dreaded finding out.

"Perhaps they have a method of reproduction?" Prowl suggested, frowning.

"Mighty fast if ya ask me. But I am glad you two were on this," Jazz said, turning around to flash a grin up at Barns in particular. "Good job, Barns. Ya did good."

Barns smiled back weakly. "I can only hope that this will give us an advantage," he said. "If we can manage them in these small amounts, we might stand a chance."

"Yeah." Jazz nodded and his expression seemed to mirror the nervousness Barns was feeling. "Let's hope."

It was their only hope.
While Prowl made plans for the military's movement, WJ focused on preparing all the proper data to give to each team and to organize all of the drone locations to make sense for the humans to understand. They had to use precise maps and leave nothing unturned. They only had a small time frame to get this done, out of concern they would antagonize their enemies and face counter-attacks.

They had approximately twenty-four hours, mainly due to the sheer magnitude of the search areas. Lennox needed time to get planes and men ready to move. They had to get help from other branches of the Army to get more man power, and coordinate subsequent attacks with their allies, should this new theory prove correct. WJ felt the pressure to get his responsibilities done on time, but at least with a day, he wasn't being rushed exactly.

They had to compare the exact locations where NEST had already looked with the much more precise visual representations of where the gamma ray shifts had occurred. The previous teams had gone to the locations Jazz had given them, but had only searched within a five or ten klick radius of each of the locations. None of them had considered the fact that the minute irregularities between their timelines might affect more than just who lived and who died.

The timelines were different; that meant that even smaller details, like the locations of the drones could be different. They had assumed perfect correspondence between events that were unrelated to what they considered to be important. That had been their greatest failure, and not one WJ would repeat in the future.

Their original questions had been answered, but now, WJ had new ones of his own. He hadn't said anything to Barns or the others yet, not wanting to distract from the matter of the drones. But he couldn't stop thinking about a glaring fact about their holo-map discoveries that he had overlooked the first time.

The drones had been found because of the gamma ray shifts. That was normal, because they were teleporting in. What wasn't normal, however, was the fact that the scientists and the ten refugees had also caused a huge gamma ray shift.

That made no sense. It made WJ even more perplexed. Time travel would involve gamma rays, yes, but not like this. All of the readings, including those that Perceptor had sent, indicated teleportation.

But the survivors hadn't teleported. They had jumped through time, as well as space. It… made no sense. At all.

This was not the time to try to unravel that scientific mystery, however. He had other obligations.

In his haste, WJ had ignored most of the flurry of activity outside of his lab. It was easy to tune out Ratchet's swearing, a bit harder to ignore the continuous commotion associated with readying the entirety of the NEST forces for battle. He knew that Ironhide was working furiously with Major Lennox to coordinate allied attacks on drones outside the United States. He had expected solitude until Prowl finally ordered him to get his information to the NEST commanders and their allies—"WJ."

The voice, human, was unexpected in the expanse of his lab and the muted chaos beyond. WJ turned and saw one of the human refugees—blond hair, designation Rachel Cooper—standing in the doorway. She appeared distressed, with her shoulders hunched and her breathing erratic. Was this because of the information about the drones? Primus knew that was just one of the problems to plague the refugees.
"Miss Cooper?" he asked, surprised. He didn't know how to anticipate any of the humans' actions. While some were very calm as of late, others could still be distraught.

Rachel gave him a look he wouldn’t soon purge from his processors. Her wild eyes were red and moist, but the rest of her small organic body radiated aggression—

Or was that fear?

"You say you're him," Rachel began, voice rising with intensity as she stalked slowly toward him; she was referring to his counterpart from another time. "Then prove it."

WJ stared, stunned. "How?" he asked, the only thing he could think to ask.

Rachel lifted her right arm where a strange device was clasped on her arm. Several other pieces of the same kind were on her other arm, and her feet. She glared at him, trembling.

"Make it better."

**End Chapter 33.**

**Chapter End Notes**

Grab your guns, folks, we're goin' huntin'. First, however, we'll be checking out the fourth interlude where, well, Sam finally gets his job done.

**A/Ns:**

- Space is about 3 degrees Kelvin above absolute zero, or −273.15°C Celsius, or −459.67°F Fahrenheit. Mechs are susceptible to cold here, but if they're prepared for space travel, naturally they can withstand below-freezing temperatures on Earth, where the lowest recorded temperature to date is −89 °C (−128 °F) but which is generally not much lower than -70 °F, even in Siberia. Otherwise the whole "lol we're robots from space" thing really wouldn't work in this universe. Megatron just sort of botched things for himself plus the polar magnetism messed up his sense of direction, so he crashed. I have nothing to say of Bumblebee's capture by S7 agents with fire extinguishers, because uhhhh, no, Bay. That doesn't work at all.
Interlude 4: Letting Go

Chapter Notes

A short break from the plot to focus on another underlying issue for the cast. Sam finally does the job Optimus had left him and Miles has a good idea. This interlude happens very soon after chapter 33. Drama alert!

Many thanks, Shantastic! :)

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Plumas NEST Base
California, USA

It was happening. Not the full out nuclear war Sam had had nightmares over. No… it was the first part of the war. The scariest part of the war. They weren't hunting mechs, or evil warlords.

They… they were hunting monsters.

Sam had sat on a bench for most of the afternoon as he watched NEST scramble to get their men organized, plan their movements, and develop secret flight plans that would be filed at the very last minute. They had a lot of ground to cover, so they couldn't just speed on out, attacking the drone locations haphazardly like Ironhide and Jazz wanted. Bumblebee wasn't going out, thankfully, but Sam still felt a nervous twitch in his gut every time he saw a soldier or a mech walk by him.

He wondered which one of his friends wouldn't be coming back this time. Mikaela would have slapped him for thinking so darkly…

But some days, like this one, he couldn't help it. It had just been a particularly shitty week for the entire base, frankly.

It was one thing to prepare for war. It was another thing to prepare for hunting down the monsters threatening them, before they had the chance to attack.

They had a lot of other problems besides preparing for this organized assault. Vortex was missing still. It was driving the survivors up the wall amid all their other stresses; Sam saw how depressed Wildrider, Danny and Jazz seemed. He noticed, just as the other survivors had, how badly Rachel seemed to be withdrawing from the world, looking horribly out of place.

He didn't know why Vortex had vanished, or where he had gone, but he could sympathize with his worried friends. There wasn't even time to go look for him now either, not with all the NEST troops mobilizing for the drone search.

It all felt so… hopeless. He didn't want to imagine the outcome of the searches that would take place
tomorrow. It was like looking for bogeymen under his bed as a little kid; he wanted to prove they weren't there, but his childlike mind had him terrified of the what-if scenario… What If They're Real?

They would find out one way or another. Sam exhaled heavily, staring out at the helicopters. He hoped Vortex was okay, if only for his friends' sakes. He wasn't totally lost in thought; he heard Miles walk up sooner than he saw him. Slowly, Sam turned his head and nodded as Miles shuffled closer. Miles smiled thinly.

"Hey, Sam," the blond teen said, sitting down more gently than normal on the bench next to his best friend.

Glancing at his friend, Sam took a moment to speak. "Hey, Miles," he offered.

Miles wasn't always the best at knowing how to judge other people's emotions (Bluestreak was a prime example), but this time, the other teen seemed to know Sam was upset. "…You okay, bro?"

Miles asked quietly.

Sam didn't know how to reply. He stared at the ground and tried to focus his thoughts. "Not… really," he said, forcing himself to say just that. It wasn't like Miles could do anything—no one could—but he couldn't lie to Miles after everything else that had happened.

"What's wrong?" Miles asked, blue eyes alight with concern.

Besides the obvious? Sam almost laughed. So many things were wrong right now. But Miles rarely saw the bad first in life. Sam sighed.

"Things suck," he said, gesturing weakly with his hand up at the world, which seemed intent on dragging all of them down into fear and chaos. It had a bad habit of doing that.

"Yeah. Kass was really upset last night," Miles said, now very interested. He glanced over at the hangar where the survivors were. "Why?"

"Vortex is missing," Sam replied, rubbing his eyes tiredly. Among other things.

Miles frowned. "Vortex… uh… oh! The flying one, right?" he asked. He shifted awkwardly on the bench. "Yeah, that makes sense. I feel bad for them all. Kass said that they were gonna go look for him, but then Prowl asked TC and Jazz-bot to help out with this search."

Sam hummed lowly, looking up across the tarmac. He watched the soldiers move. He wondered if they would really find the drones. He hoped they would. At least they…

They could do something.

"I feel useless," he said quietly, startling Miles. "I can't do anything to help."

He couldn't help them with the drone search. He couldn't help the survivors with their pain, or finding their friend. He couldn't offer any help, not even with medic responsibilities like Mikaela could.

Miles clasped his hand around Sam's shoulder and shook him gently. "You aren't useless, bro," he said, meaning it. Sometimes his honesty was irritating, but Sam couldn't be annoyed with Miles now. "You still have that job from Optimus."

"But he's dead," Sam replied, clenching his eyes tightly shut in pain. "I never did what he asked."
He'd never fixed the problems between the human survivors and NEST. It was the easiest job there and he hadn't even scratched the surface. The relationship was getting worse, if Rachel's melancholy was anything to look at as proof. And while the survivors had started to fit in better, were known by NEST personnel and were actively taking part in their defense, they hadn't really adapted to life in this time and place. Sam hadn't helped them. And he had never felt more useless in his life.

"...Hey, bro?"

Sam looked up and saw Miles staring at him, looking strangely… enlightened.

"Just how were you gonna help them out, anyway?" Miles asked, arching a blond eyebrow.

"I never had a plan, Miles," Sam said with a heavy sigh. "Finding a way to convince my dad to help me buy a car? Yeah—that kind of thing I can plan. This stuff… not my thing, obviously."

"...Huh." Miles scratched his nose and started to smile. "Well, I just had an idea."

Sam blinked.

Miles grinned.

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Four Hours Later

Sam wasn't sure if this was a good idea or not. In fact, he was pretty sure it wasn't. Miles had been so sure when he had told Sam the idea, and even now, the blond human was elated that Sam had listened. All Sam could do was keep looking at the four humans who were walking along with them and wonder if they were doing the right thing.

"You don't know anything about psychology!" Mikaela had told him, not supporting the plan at all. "Sam, you might screw this up worse than it is. Just—be careful."

Her negativity hadn't been encouraging in the least. It had taken them hours to get the plan together, the scene set. It had taken even longer for Sam to coax the survivors out from their hiding places. They had had to pry Barns out of his computer station, with the promise that they'd be quick about this. Rachel had been with WJ, of all mechs, but had quickly agreed to go rather than let anyone peek in on what the scientist was tinkering with. Getting the four human survivors to go with them into the forest, away from the base and prying eyes, had been difficult. They weren't alone either.

The red-and-black mech, Wildrider, had demanded that he accompany them, highly suspicious of Sam's involvement. Sam reluctantly agreed, mostly because he knew having a mech with them in such dangerous times might actually be a good idea. Then again, it was Wildrider… so he hoped sincerely there wouldn't be any trouble.

"What are we doing?" Rachel demanded. "I thought you said this was a training exercise. I have shit to do."

"With WJ?" Barns challenged, arching an eyebrow. Rachel turned pink and refused to elaborate.

"It is a training exercise!" Miles said, cheerfully. He kept pace with Kass, grinning over at her. "I was trying to think of—well, think of things Sam could do to help you guys, and I had this brainstorm, like whoa."

Kass smiled, patient. "And it's going to help us fight better?" she asked.
"No, I think you guys have that down pat," Miles replied, sincere. He waved at Rachel, who looked ready to turn back around at that admission. "But wait! It's more important than you think!"

"What other training exercise would help us?" she asked, scowling at her supposed-uncle (Sam's brain was still reeling from that revelation.)

Miles paused and then looked oddly serious. "You'll see," he said, firm. Rachel arched an eyebrow over at her friends, who also looked bewildered, but Miles had already turned around and led them further down a small park path.

Feeling increasingly uneasy, Sam caught up with Miles before he stopped short at a clearing. They let the other five trudge ahead, Wildrider scowling at them suspiciously as he went by, but Sam turned to his human friend, nervous.

"Optimus needed me to do this right, Miles," he said, whispering urgently. He grasped his best friend's shoulder tightly. "I'm supposed to help these people, okay?"

Miles smiled back and patted Sam's shoulder. "Sambo, you forget who you're talking to," he said. His confidence wasn't totally reassuring. "I'm not gonna goof this up when I know how important it is to you, and to them."

"What the shit is this?" Rachel suddenly exclaimed, startling them both. Sam hurried over and saw the survivors standing exactly where they were supposed to be standing.

Sam and Mikaela, during one of the brief exploring missions they had gone on while visiting the base ages ago, had found a very odd set-up in the woods. It might have been the leftovers of an archery range, or just a unique formation of rocks. A large wall of boulders faced them from about twenty yards away. Sam had always thought they looked like part of a firing range, or somewhere to put an easy target.

By the humans stood a tower of smaller rocks and pebbles that Sam knew had been deliberately placed there, specifically by Miles, a few hours earlier.

"Are we firing at the rocks?" Danny asked, curious.

Wildrider tilted his helm at the rocks, frowning. "Vith vhat?"

"Vith these!" Miles suddenly burst in, causing everyone to look at him again. His fake accent didn't do much to alleviate the awkwardness, so he chuckled weakly as he held up one of many smaller rocks he had collected earlier. "A rock."

"We're hitting rocks with rocks?" Barns asked, bemused. "Ah, I see."

"No, wait, it's not about hitting rocks," Miles said, insistently. He held out a rock to Kass and nodded over at the wall of rocks they'd be throwing it at. "Pretend that the bigger rocks are Mega—ah, I mean, the Galvatron dude."

Kass stared at his hand and then back at his face. "...It's a rock," she deadpanned.

Miles chuckled weakly. "Hence 'pretend.'" He held the rock out further. "Come on, give it a try."

"What's the point?" Rachel snapped, irritable. "This is stupid."

"Just try it," Miles pleaded. None of them moved. Turning, Sam decided to go with Plan B. 

*Patience...*
"Watch me," he instructed, taking the rock from his best friend. Miles looked surprised, but he went along with it.

Facing the boulder, Sam tried to figure out how to go ahead and do this. He hadn't planned on being the one to throw anything. He didn't think he had a lot to be upset about, at least not compared to the survivors. But he knew they were on the verge of rejecting the idea, so it was up to him to at least try this. The adults and the mechs were counting on him. This is what Optimus would have told him to do.

Sam stood there with the rock piercing into his palm and he thought. He had experienced nowhere near the amount of suffering that these people had... but he knew terror. His life was slowly coming unraveled and someday, if things didn't improve, perhaps he would know exactly what these four had gone through.

Suddenly, Sam felt a twinge of panic grip his heart.

He threw the rock at the boulder almost reflectively. "I am never going to college," he said the first thing that came to mind.

Sam stopped and looked down at the rock pile. He crouched to get another, avoiding looking over at the four survivors. He could see from the corner of his eye that Miles was surprised. Sam took a deep breath and braced himself to throw again, trying to find the emotion to match his words. Suddenly, it wasn't that hard. "I... I can't ever have a normal life because your Goddamn followers know my face —!"

He hurled it as far and as hard as he could, shattering it against the boulder. He stood there, breathing shakily. "I almost died because of you—and I can't go to sleep at night without—feeling—afraid!"

"You tortured 'Bee—stole his voice."

Sam kept throwing, his words punctuated by the sound of his throwing and effort.

"You killed Optimus!"

It was almost too easy to find reasons to hate this creature, whatever form he was now taking. Even if he had not gone through Hell growing up—

That was the future he faced. Because... of this... one... monster.

"I hate you for everything you've ever done to me," he said, not raising his voice anymore. He glared at the rock wall, knowing it was rock, but feeling an anger he hadn't realized he had and directing it at someone who should have been lying thousands of feet below the ocean's surface, "and my family and my friends—" With a yell, he hurled a larger rock, the feeling of throwing it making his arms burn. "I hate you for this war, for—for everything!"

He stumbled from the last throw and he found himself shaking there, staring at rock, sweating and trembling.

He meant every word. The fear, the terrorization, the loss of his world—everything came down to Megatron's arrival on Earth, and had originated with his greed and his desire for power and control. Optimus was dead because of him. These people had suffered, and so would this Earth, because of him.

"I hate you," he whispered, closing his eyes.
The entire world felt too heavy for him anymore. There were too many concerns, too many worries… Sam didn't think it was right for any of them to have to bear those burdens. He was a kid. He didn't… deserve to have to be there, wondering about how to save the world.

It wasn't fair.

Beside him, the others hadn't moved at all. Sam stared at the ground and slowly started to walk back to the base. He sighed, rubbing a hand over his weary face. He knew it had been too much to hope that he could help in any way. Maybe Mikaela was right; this idea was stupid. He appreciated Miles’ insight, but maybe… it wasn't good enough.

He had not expected to hear a rock clatter. He spun around, shocked, and saw Kass standing there. She was breathing unsteadily and her eyes were shining brighter than they had been. She trembled as she held up another rock, rage and grief building up in her expression like a wave of water.

"I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, you stupid, rotten, horrible monster!" she exclaimed, hurling the rock as hard as she could. It flew and clattered against the rocky outcropping. It didn't do any damage, but that just seemed to infuriate Kass more. She took another rock and hurled it. "You did this—YOU DID ALL OF THIS!"

Sam immediately stepped back when he saw Barns follow her example and go for a rock. He didn't say anything, but he threw it, the rock slamming hard into the rock, the smaller one breaking. He grabbed another, and suddenly, Sam realized that maybe, even if it was stupid, the idea wasn't totally a waste of time.

"You worked my grandparents to the bone," Barns muttered, not crying like Kass was now, but he was breathing heavily and his eyes shone brightly. "Made them die in the dirt—when they should have been in our home—you took my childhood, my mother, my father—!

"EVERYTHING!" Rachel suddenly shrieked. She hurled a rock and didn't wait for it to hit before she reached for another. "My mom, my dad, my sisters, my goddamn LIFE!"

A yell of anger and grief made Sam flinch when a rock flew dangerously close to his head. He saw Danny, finally appearing from her position at Wildrider's side, grabbing at the pile. She looked transfixed as she stood, taking deep, wavering breaths, her eyes huge.

"You killed Wheeljack," she whispered. Tears streamed down her face without prompt, her eyes never blinking. "You took my parents… my identity…" And then, something snapped behind her eyes and the strained grief morphed into rage. "You. Killed. Wheeljack."

She was not the only one to keep going. Sam moved all the way back to a fallen log with Miles, both watching in stunned silence as the four humans quickly dismantled the tower of rocks. They threw with all of their might, their hate and grief giving them the strength to hurl the rocks fiercely. And they kept talking, telling the rock wall and the world just how much everything really had hurt them.

"I hate you! I HATE YOU! You locked Bluestreak in a dark cave and left him to DIE ALONE!"

Kass was screaming now, stumbling from tears and sobs. "YOU KILLED MY MOTHER—MY FATHER—MY BABY BROTHER!" She stopped for another rock and a gasp of air. "ALL YOU'VE EVER DONE IS HURT—ME—I—HATE—YOU!"

"Tout ce que j'ai su est la peur," Barns said, never screaming, but he was crying now. He kept throwing until he eventually had to stop, losing his strength, letting his grief take over. "Je n'avais jamais la chance de dire à ma mère au revoir, ou mes grand-pères. Goddard ... il est mort à cause de vous! À cause de vous! Je vous déteste... Je vous déteste!"
Danny held nothing back. "YOU KILLED WHEELJACK!" she screamed over and over. "YOU DID! YOU KILLED HIM, YOU KILLED HIM, YOU KILLED HIM—!"

There was only so much they could say, Sam realized, trying not to get caught up in their emotional torrent himself. Eventually, words gave way to screams of frustration, anguish, and rage. Kass had stopped throwing and walked toward the opposite line of trees, sobbing. She sat down and buried her face in her knees.

Danny kept throwing until there were no more rocks. She kicked at the ground and threw herself onto it, beating her hands onto the dirt, sobbing.

Rachel finally collapsed to her knees with a horrible scream and let her head touch the pine needles. Sam hadn't thought it possible for a person to make such a heartbreaking sound—but he could hear the grief and torment and all the pain she was feeling fly free with her screaming and sobs.

"I hate you, I hate you, I hate you…" she wailed, shuddering as she cried.

Behind them, Wildrider stood silently, watching. Any semblance of insanity or mirth had disappeared from his faceplates. He just stood there in silent support.

Sam had nothing he could say, even as the screaming stopped and the sounds of crying dominated the clearing. He had expected this to fail, because Mikeala was right; he didn't know anything about psychology or how to deal with grief or victims of trauma.

But… he did know what it was like to bottle all of the feelings of fear and grief, and never let them out. Because it would slow him down, or hurt his parents or because he didn't want to bother his friends with his problems. He knew surviving just one battle had done that to him – had made it impossible to tell his mother why he woke up in night terrors, or to tell Bumblebee just how much fear he actually had to deal with every day when he realized that yes, they were at war, and their chances were so poor.

Sam realized that for these survivors, it had to be a thousand times worse—and because he knew that, he also knew that there was one thing that they had never had the chance to do, that he, in all of his inadequacy, could finally give them.

They had to let go. No one… not even fate… had given them the chance to just stop and… let go.

Sam wiped furiously at his face; Miles didn't comment on his heavy breathing, because Sam was pretty sure he had started to cry, too.

Wildrider had sat down with his human friends and held Danny and Barns close on his lap. Rachel, tough as ever, wiped her face until her cheeks were bright red and her eyes were overly dry. She ignored Miles' worried look and stomped past both him and Sam, her walk unsteady. Sam let her go, knowing she needed the privacy to finish grieving.

When Kass finally got up and walked over to them, Sam expected her to go to Miles. He didn't quite brace himself enough for Kass to throw her arms around his neck and hold on with a grip that her slight frame hid all too well.

"Thank you," she whispered in a muffled voice, tears seeping into his shirt. Sam hid his shakes behind her own trembles.

"It's okay," he said, hugging her back. "It's… okay."

It would be. At least… for now.
Next, Rachel gives her parents a headache and Vortex gets just what he wanted.

**A/Ns (or rather, beta's note!):**
- Clearly, Sam knows nothing about how a shooting range should be set up. Please folks, never shoot a firearm (high velocity projectile weapon) at a target set up in front of a rock wall! The ricochet could kill you (or someone else). Archery is okay though!
The time to act was now. They had only a few hours to really dwell on what had happened. The drones had sneaked their way onto Earth, but their locations were hopefully known. They had the chance to find them… they had the chance to win the war, before Earth was destroyed.

Wildrider had only spent a short amount of time listening to Jazz talk war plans with Thundercracker. He had then spent the rest of his night with Danny, talking quietly in secret.

Bluestreak was going with the search teams the following day, just like Jazz and Thundercracker, because of his sniper capabilities. Thundercracker was irreplaceable air support, Prowl had said, almost too-nicely, which made Wildrider feel uncomfortable. Jazz, was going too, of course, because he was Autobot. Arcee was staying behind, and apparently, so was Wildrider.

He did not like this. Neither did Danny, because she had been passed over as well by NEST and even by Jazz to go with the search teams. Barns was going with Lennox’s team, mostly to help read the data. That had been difficult for Barns to earn; NEST had fought him on it. He wasn't a fighter, they said; he was only a civilian. He won because of WJ's insistence as well.

That had only made Danny and Wildrider more convinced it wasn't fair that they had to stay behind. They hadn't even been asked to go. They might not have the technical knowledge Barns had, Danny pointed out, but they could fight. She could use a gun like any of the soldiers could. She knew how the drones moved better than the NEST soldiers or even the Autobots did.

Rachel deserved to go too, but she hadn't voiced any anger about not going. She had spent all day in WJ's lab, which didn't make sense, but there wasn't much time to investigate. Kass probably would have wanted to go as well, but since she was a medic, she had to stay and treat any incoming injured. At least she had some sort of responsibility, Wildrider thought darkly. She was not considered
useless.

As for him—nothing. NEST had still given him nothing, except menial chores. He had asked to be sent to look for Vortex. That had been denied, or well, ignored in light of the drone revelation. It wasn't fair for him to be ignored now, however, when he was another able-bodied mech willing to search, knowing how to fight. He knew the drones well; he was an asset for this.

It didn't take much to convince him or Danny to decide to confront Major Lennox about going with the searchers. Wildrider knew the humans were desperate. There were many locations to search, Barns had pointed out. Even if it was Danny and him alone on the road as scouts, it was something they could do that would be useful for NEST. Wildrider couldn't imagine them ignoring him then.

They didn't go to Jazz first. He was busy with Thundercracker and Prowl, talking "business" with Ironhide about tactics. Boring.

Instead, they went straight to where the Major was that afternoon, just as the skies were beginning to get dark. It was very cold out now, almost as cold as the winter they'd left behind in Europe a few months before, but Danny walked with a confident step, clearly ready to fight for her right to, well, fight. Wildrider was confident as well.

They walked past Arcee, who was leaving the storage hangar. She stared at them both in surprise. They normally didn't go there together, so it was probably an odd sight.

"Where are you two going?" the femme asked, helm tilted.

"To talk with Lennox," Danny replied, sounding determined, over her shoulder. The soldier in question was only a few hundred yards ahead. Ratchet was near him too, discussing something animatedly with Hoist and more human soldiers.

Arcee seemed surprised by this. "...Why?" she asked. She glanced up at the mech, warily. "Wildrider?" He didn't reply.

"We won't take long," Danny said instead. She smiled wryly. "Hopefully."

Arcee didn't look pleased, but let them walk past her. Wildrider was more intent on Lennox. Danny peered up at him and Wildrider glanced down at her, feeling a little bit of nervousness in his spark.

Well… it was now, or never.

They made their way over to where the human commander was talking quietly with some of his underlings. One of the unfamiliar soldiers noticed Wildrider first and turned a humorous shade of pink. Wildrider grinned back, or at least he did until Lennox turned around. While the Major remained polite, Wildrider did not miss the unease that also flickered through his organic optics when Lennox noticed just who Wildrider was. It was almost hurtful to Wildrider's feelings.

"What?" Lennox asked immediately, eyes going to Danny in confusion once he noticed she was there as well. "What's up?"

Danny took a deep breath as she stopped just a few feet ahead of where Wildrider stopped. "We want to help. Me and 'Rider," she said. At Lennox's frown, Danny added, "We're ready to hunt the drones."

It was as simple as that. They didn't want anything special, or any sort of reward. Wildrider braced himself, watching closely to see how the human soldiers reacted. While going to Prowl or one of the Autobot leaders might give them more of a chance (when there was need, they were even less stingy
with rules than the humans were), the humans were easier to manipulate.

Lennox opened his mouth to speak, but stopped himself. He glanced to the side, then over at Ratchet, who was far enough away that he didn't notice the question. Danny waited with patiently crossed arms and Wildrider mimicked her pose. Both were willing to stand there all day if needed, Wildrider knew.

After a long time, Lennox's eyes narrowed a little as he shook his head. "We can't use you. Not yet," he said. He cut off Danny's immediate reply, waving his hand. "We're doing preliminary scouting missions first. This isn't a real battle." He sent the tiny woman a severe look. "Besides, you can't just go in there, Danny."

"Why not?" Danny exclaimed loudly, bewildered.

Wildrider' engines rumbled in agreement. "Yes, why not?" he demanded. Despite being squishy, Danny had always fought and did so well enough, like any other human. He'd be there to help her, too.

"You don't have any weapons or protection," Lennox replied. He was oddly sympathetic. "You're not a soldier."

Danny was always the most peaceable human in their group. She had made a name for herself, even here on the NEST base, for being friendly and patient. Wildrider wasn't surprised, though, to see emotion build up on her face, which had turned darker than normal too. Lennox noticed and seemed surprised.

"I am too a soldier," Danny said, interrupting whatever comment Lennox was about to make. "I've been one my whole life." She gestured at herself, voice rising in volume and a tremor in her words. "I've been fighting these things longer than you've even known aliens existed. My life is fighting these things. And you need my help."

Even to Wildrider, her reasoning was sound. It wasn't fair to say their four humans weren't soldiers—they were so deeply caught up in this war, especially now, that it was crazy to say they weren't good enough to fight, to pick up a gun. They had reasons to fight. Kass had said it well; the survivors deserved the chance to fight against the drones more than the army did.

It wasn't just about survival now; Wildrider's spark trembled with dark feeling. It was about revenge.

"The answer is no," Lennox said sharply, remaining firm, despite Danny's glare. "I'm sorry. I'm sure we'll all be fighting for our lives sometime soon, and then you're going to wish you weren't."

Danny seemed to struggle to find words to speak. "Then what about 'Rider—?" she began, reaching out in desperation.

All at once, the conversation was no longer just between the three of them. Wildrider flinched backwards when the sound of a backfiring engine made the humans jump. Ratchet was stalking over to them, optics blazing. Apparently, he had finally caught up to the conversation.

"Absolutely not!" the medic shouted. He sent Wildrider a scathing look before looking over at Lennox. "I have not cleared him for combat yet and there is no way I am sending a mech out there with a potentially detrimental glitch."

Wildrider snarled. "I have always fought!" he shot back. This was ridiculous; who cared about his glitch? He had to fight, to help defend his family.
Thoroughly unimpressed, the Autobot medic glared at him. "I didn't mean detrimental to you. Primus above!" he said, practically rolling his optics. Wildrider growled lowly when Ratchet poked him harshly in the chestplates. "I have no doubt you are eager to fight, Wildrider, and I know you mean well, but this is a scouting mission. You will just have to wait."

Fists clenching, Wildrider wanted to challenge the medic right then and there. He'd fight him and win—proving he could do just fine.

But that wouldn't work. He had to play nice with the Autobots, no matter how stupid they were. But by playing nice, that meant he had to follow their orders. And their orders fragging sucked.

His anger was dulled when Danny suddenly spoke up again below. "What about close-by sites then? We can go check those out for you!" she offered, looking desperately between both Ratchet and Lennox. Ratchet looked like he was ready to step on her.

Lennox sent her a patient look, however. "We'll get to them all, Danny, believe me," he said, tired. "We can't just rush into investigating."

"We'll be scouts!" Danny said. Wildrider knew it was a lost cause by the distant looks in both Ratchet and Lennox's faces. Danny kept trying regardless. "Come on, Lennox! I'm going to go nuts. Why can't we help?"

"Danny..." Lennox began, trying not to say anything harsh. He didn't have to. Everything he was saying, regardless of intention, was harming both Wildrider and Danny.

Danny was clearly fighting back tears at that point. "You're going to regret not having us help you," she said, frustrated to the point she was shaking. "We can do stuff, even if it's little things."

Lennox frowned gravely. "I know you can help," the commander replied. "We just can't use you right now. I'm sorry, but that's final."

He grabbed the paper his aide had and pushed past Danny, probably just to get away from them both in case they tried to keep pushing it. The other soldiers caught on and slipped away, sending both Danny and Wildrider odd looks as they passed. Wildrider stood there motionlessly. He was almost stunned.

…Why?

Silence left them alone. Ratchet departed with a firm glare sent to Wildrider. That woke him up. He turned and watched the Autobot leave.

Why?!

Danny sniffed. She looked away from everyone, particularly the departing humans, and seemed to be fighting some internal reaction. Her shoulders slumped. Without a word, she left Wildrider, probably to seek her own form of solitude. Wildrider let her go, because if he was going to be honest—he needed his own.

He wanted to fight this. He'd find Prowl. Or Ironhide. He'd make them—tell them—to let them help. He couldn't just let this go.

Arcee stayed closer than she had before, however, and Wildrider wanted to ignore her. While she was there, he couldn't just go off and punch a hole in a wall. Or a car. Or another mech. She seemed to understand that about him all too well and remained where she was, watching.
Engines rumbling lowly, Wildrider forced himself to sit down on the crate behind him. Arcee rolled up and quietly observed him.

"Your time will come," she offered. Matter-of-factly, without trying to make it worse or better.

Wildrider scowled. "I vant to protect now," he said.

"I know you do," she replied gently.

"I vant to protect our family. Our gestalt," Wildrider continued, incensed. He turned and sent the femme a fierce look, not caring if he scared her. "I vant to protect you."

Arcee watched him out of the corner of her optics. "I don't need protection any more than the others do," she said, carefully choosing her words. Wildrider noticed.

"Everyvone needs protection," he replied firmly. He shook his helm. "Ve are team. That is what teams do."

He didn't know where Vortex was. He didn't know what would happen to Jazz or Thundercracker or Bluestreak if they went out after the drones. It scared him—the unknowing. They didn't have answers back in their own world as to who would live each day… but at least it was relatively routine. And they were always together.

Here, they were dancing with fate. Barns had said that to Jazz when he thought no one could hear. They were diving into the darkness of an unknown future, a free fall that might kill them all.

But… if he could help… he would do it. He had to.

"Who will protect you then?" Arcee suddenly asked, interrupting his thoughts like a jolt of lightning.

Wildrider turned and stared down at the femme with open surprise. Arcee watched him carefully, probably gauging his reaction. Femmes were always careful, always watchful. They knew how to read a mech all too well. It made them dangerous.

"Wildrider…" Arcee began, shaking her helm slowly. "You can still protect our friends on base. Only a few of us are leaving. I'm not. Kass is not."

That was true. Someone had to stay behind to protect their squishy friends who weren't leaving the base. But Wildrider knew he would rather go in place of any of his Cybertronian companions, including Jazz and Thundercracker. He'd rather take up the dangerous road alone.

Too much like Goddard to let them go instead. And Wheeljack. Wildrider whined.

"I am made for var. It is what I was created to do," he said, vehemence slipping into his tone. He gestured at his chestplates stiffly. "I am weapon."

He wished Vortex was still there. He'd understand that sentiment. Arcee probably did too, being part of a triad once. But instead of nodding, Arcee's frown increased.

"You are Wildrider," she said, helm tilting to the side.

Wildrider growled and waved his hand. "Bah…"

He had to find a way to get the military to accept his help. He had to find a way to do this. He would go crazy—crazier—if he just stayed there, wasting his energy, while his few friends out there were
risking their lives doing something he could do with less risk—

Arcee gently laid her hand on his shoulder, their colors clashing vibrantly, and he froze in surprise.

"You are also my friend," she said, quietly, even though it was loud to his spark. "Let's just wait for our turn to fight. I am sure it will come far sooner than we wanted."

She backed off quickly, like she always did. The sensation of her hand touching his armor lingered and Wildrider couldn't find the strength to speak as she rolled off, set in her way, leaving him with a bit of wisdom he didn't want.

Was this really his future?

Sitting there, while his companions left him behind? He didn't care about glory, or fighting, or even revenge. He wanted to help his team. That was it. But he couldn't, because of what he had been, because of what he was.

He cursed Galvatron. He cursed the drones, for taking away his brothers—and his sanity. Even if it had brought him to his current family, what good was he now? No one wanted him to fight with them, no one beside his teammates, who were all playing nice with the Autobots.

They were wasting him. Wildrider hissed and fought back another wave of senseless anger. It wasn't fair. It was stupid. But… what could he do?

He didn't want to go back and have to sit there with Danny, both dwelling on their failure to get anywhere with themselves. All alone, while the others did so much more—

…except.

Except… they… were alone.

Wildrider paused and stared out at the air, processors realizing something they had both missed.

It wasn't the drones, or Galvatron. But it was something else.

Slowly, his anger faded. He felt enlightened. And also ashamed for having taken so long to realize what he and Danny could actually do to help.

They weren't allowed to fight. Fine.

Wildrider focused his mind and set his spark on another important goal, this one perhaps the most important.

NEST needed them, whether they realized it or not, but that was irrelevant now. Because more than anything, their family needed them. Wildrider would just have to prove it.

He left the hangar and headed quickly back to where their camp was, in the adjacent hangar. He found Danny seated alone on one of the crates. She looked up as he walked over and Wildrider slowed down so that he stood in front of her.

"Danny," he said. He analyzed her reaction; lit-up eyes, worried lines creased under them, posture ready to leap up at the slightest news he had to give her.

"Yeah?" Danny replied, standing up as expected. She glanced back to where he had walked from and looked back up at Wildrider, her frustration and fear mixed. "They're not gonna let us go, huh?"
Wildrider shook his helm. "No." At least not as they had hoped.

Danny sighed heavily, her heart obviously broken up about this. Wildrider hesitated, considering. She noticed his staring and looked back at him with curiosity, waiting for him to speak.

"...I have plan," he said at length. It wasn't necessarily a good plan, but it wasn't bad. Wasn't... too dangerous.

"What kind of plan?" Danny asked, surprised.

Wildrider leaned closer, illuminating her face with a green glow. "You trust me?" he asked, already knowing the answer in his spark.

"Yeah," Danny said, nodding firmly. "Always."

That was all he ever really needed to hear. "Good." He lifted his hand to her, begging her patience and the chance to tell her everything and be understood. "Let me explain."

0000

That Evening

It was really weird, watching everyone move. Sam had sat back with Mikaela and Miles the whole afternoon, just observing as NEST assembled their search teams. They'd be leaving tomorrow before dawn, sending out teams at varying intervals. Bumblebee had told them that the plan was for the base to work on a rotation—as one team came back to refuel and rest up, they would brief the next team on what to expect, then that team would go out and search a new area, and then the cycle could continue.

They had a lot of area to cover. Sam felt bad for being unable to offer his help, but he knew this was really a military operation. He didn't exactly relish the idea of running into a bunch of drones by himself. They sounded nasty.

"What did they look like?" Miles asked, in his usual unabashed way, when Kass stopped by after dinner to sit with them near a little heater they had set up in the rec-area.

Kass had paused and seemed to do that little shrug a lot of the survivors—including the mechs—did when they were asked something uncomfortable. Sam held his tongue, though, since Kass had gotten comfortable enough with the three of them to tell Miles to back off of a certain topic if it was really painful.

"They look like... squid. Floating, metal squid," she said carefully. She avoided looking any of the teens in the eye. "One big optic. It always seemed like there were loads of serrated limbs, though most only had ten or twelve. They moved so fast, it was very difficult to keep up with them in a fight."

Miles glanced at Sam warily. "...Did you fight them?" he asked. They knew Kass, as well as the other survivors, had all fought for their lives.

"Yes." Kass huddled a bit more under her parka. She ignored Mikaela's concerned look and Sam's increasing discomfort. "They're vicious things. They hunt in swarms of seven or more—it's uncommon to find one by itself. I hope the search teams only find them at a distance, and not up close. A swarm can bring down a mech... very easily. Humans..."

She stared at the heater for a moment in silence. Sam looked over at Mikaela.
"Humans even easier," Kass added, almost like an afterthought. Like it didn't bother her, but they knew it did. Sam shuddered.

"...so that's gonna be it," someone approaching said, surprising them all. Heavy footfalls. Mechs.

Miles looked up in alarm, but Mikaela and Sam were both far more used to seeing mechs walking around by themselves, appearing without much warning. Jazz appeared first, though it was impossible to not notice Thundercracker right behind him, as they stepped out toward the wider section of the hangar where the humans were seated.

"It would work best that way," Prowl answered, as he walked up calmly behind them. He looked specifically up at the Seeker in front of him. "I do hope you don't mind going in first, Thundercracker. It would be best to use our faster soldiers first."

Thundercracker, despite being a menacing figure, shrugged. "Not a problem." He was the calm one out of the survivor group, after all.

"An' my crew goes in th' second wave," Jazz added. He laughed, though Sam could tell he was nervous by how he wasn't looking either mech in the optic. "Like Where's Waldo, only involving landmines in stripes." He paused, ignoring the strained, oddly similar glares both mechs sent him at his flippant comparison. Jazz was instead focusing on the four humans in front of them. "Oh, hey! 'Sup kiddos?"

"Don't call me that," Kass replied automatically, even as Miles waved enthusiastically. Sam smiled politely.

"Hey, Jazz," Mikaela said, much friendlier. Jazz sent her a grin.

"Havin' fun? Should getcha guys some marshmallows or somethin'," the silver mech said, cheerful as always. He nudged the stoic Thundercracker beside him before looking around expectantly. "Need a bonfire fer that though." The humans laughed.

"Indoor fires are not permitted on base," Prowl said automatically. Sam hid a smile; it wasn't like the tactician tried to be mean. He was just really serious.

Jazz rolled off the blunt reprimand with practiced ease. "Ah, party-pooper." He froze as if recalling something and seemed to focus in on Kass. "Hey... where's my kiddo?"

"Huh?" Sam blinked.

Thundercracker moved closer, optics narrowed. "Where is Rachel?" he translated. Ah, right. Sam was still trying to get past the whole issue of some of the survivors having family groups between mechs and humans. He couldn't really blame them though; he considered 'Bee to be his own brother.

Kass frowned. "I dunno. I figured she was with Danny, but Arcee said Danny and 'Rider were out by Hangar A for a while, not with Rachel."

"Rats," Jazz said, looking disappointed. He shifted awkwardly. "I was hopin' she wouldn't be sulkin' still."

Sam wasn't sure why she would be—except for the Vortex thing? He didn't ask. That would be rude, even if the survivors weren't just one big ball of drama.

"Can you blame her?" Kass demanded, arching an eyebrow.
Jazz visibly wilted and Thundercracker also seemed to withdraw. "Right…" Jazz murmured. He glanced up at the jet beside him. "I hope she'll be back t' sleep with us tonight. I don't wanna leave without sayin' goodbye an' all."

"I'm surprised she hasn't demanded to be involved in the search," Thundercracker said. His voice was so deep compared to the others, but oddly not louder. "She wasn't happy with us going, but you'd think she'd want to fight as well."

Behind them, Prowl hesitated. Sam noticed before any of the others did. While he had never been particularly close with Prowl since the tactician had come to Earth, Sam had already been looking his way and saw the black-and-white mech's doorwings twitch rather obviously. Sam stared in surprise.

What… was that?

"Perhaps it would be wise to not cast judgment on Rachel's presumed choices at the present time," Prowl said, speaking deliberately and oddly slow. It was enough that everyone noticed.

"What?" Jazz asked, turning to face the Autobot commander. Both he and Thundercracker appeared surprised.

Prowl didn't get the chance to answer. Someone else spoke up first.

"I'm in, too."

Sam froze at the sudden voice, which was almost muffled in quality, so he couldn't tell who had spoken. It was definitely not anyone near him. If he wasn't mistaken it had come from—the ceiling?

Turning, Sam wasn't the only one to gasp at the sight of a metal humanoid figure hovering distinctly above the catwalk hundreds of yards away from them in the air. The figure had propulsion devices, sort of like Thundercracker's heel turbines, on the arms and along the length of its legs, extending past the feet like shoe heels. The blue glass facial shield blocked any recognizable features that would have told him who he was looking at.

"What the heck is that?" he heard Miles asked, just as startled as Sam felt.

It was not a mech. But Sam wasn't entirely sure it was human, even with the humanoid shape. It looked like a person inside a metal suit, complete with shoulder armor and a dark blue metal breastplate. It was… a suit of armor? A flying suit of armor?

Just as the figure touched down on the railing of the catwalk, balancing itself slightly, Sam saw Thundercracker and Jazz move closer, both oddly shaken.

"Rachel?" Jazz asked, sounding both disturbed and confused.

In response, the figure reached up and pulled off the helmet. Blond hair and a pale face greeted her audience—Rachel Cooper tucked the helmet under her arm and smiled faintly at Jazz.

"Yeah," she said. She glanced down at herself, at the alien technology covering her. "Like the upgrades? I think I look sort of badass, but the controls are freaking ridiculous. WJ said he'll tone it down by tomorrow, so we're good for moving out."

Jazz flinched as if he had been struck. "What… what the hell?" he asked, visor widening. "Rachel, what're you doin'? !"

"Why are you wearing that?" Thundercracker demanded immediately after Jazz spoke, both
radiating similar shock.

Rachel wasn't bothered by their reaction. "Think, idiot," the human said, rolling her eyes. "I'm going with the search party."

"What? !" both mechs exclaimed, loud enough that the humans (even Rachel) flinched. Prowl made a rumbling sound of disapproval and eyed the humans near him. Sam was more focused on the three in front of him; he had no idea where this could go.

"I'm one of the few humans who knows how to fight the drones face to face," Rachel snapped, now irritated. "Not that I'm aiming to, mind you, but with the suit, I can engage them in the air, which is what we need." She shook her head as she adjusted her grip on the helmet. "Our air support sucks right now, so we gotta take what we can get."

All of that made sense. Except for the part where it was Rachel saying it and that she was a human being parading around in mech skin. It was a bit much for Sam to handle, though Rachel's robotic guardians handled it even worse than he did.

"N-no! This is—!" Jazz made a sputtering sound as his vocalizer seemed to backfire. He shook his helm severely. "Rachel, you are not goin' with us."

"Too bad. I already cleared this with Lennox and Ironhide," Rachel said coolly, unimpressed. She glanced over and caught Prowl's steady gaze. "And judging by the looks of things, Prowl said okay, too."

Thundercracker loomed. "You are NOT going," he snarled, stepping toward the catwalk. Sam fought the urge to back away even though the jet was only focused on Rachel. Man, he was terrifying—

Rachel didn't even flinch, eyeing the Seeker as if he weren't a three-story threat. "Oh, yeah?" she drawled.

Backing up the jet, Jazz motioned sharply at the human. "Get out of the suit. Now," he said, voice growing louder as Rachel refused to budge. "I mean it, Rach. Now."

With more courage than Sam knew she had, Rachel moved her hand slightly and was suddenly airborne. The faint hissing from the turbines drifted with her as she rose up to Thundercracker's eyelevel, a glare of her own in place.

"I'm not a child. I'm a free woman. I can do what I want to," she said calmly, her voice not matching the glare at all. She turned and looked down at Jazz, arching an eyebrow. "And I want to help save our lives. Isn't that what you asked us to do?"

"No, I asked—," Jazz began, visibly struggling.

"Us to do what we can with what we have," Rachel immediately interrupted, now louder. She motioned viciously at herself, making Thundercracker flinch slightly. "I am a fighter, Jazz. Look at me!"

Her shout rang across the room, echoing almost in the silence that followed it. Sam stared, his heart barely beating, he was so afraid to move. He couldn't hear his friends breathing. Even Prowl was motionless, his doorwings high on his back and optics wide with shock. Sam could barely see Thundercracker and Jazz's expressions, but both mechs seemed utterly speechless.

Rachel stared at her guardians, looking so small compared to them, but she held her head high. She
wasn't trying to fight with them. She was trying to make a point, though Sam was struggling to keep up with what it was. Beside him, Kass made a quiet sound, looking heartbroken.

"Look at me," Rachel began, voice hoarse. "I am a fighter. Right now, I can be a soldier." She looked between the two stunned mechs, expression somewhat tortured, though she kept her composure rather well. "I offered and they accepted. So I'm going to help you kill these fuckers."

Thundercracker seemed like he was about to fall over. Jazz opened his mouth to speak, but didn't. Rachel's eyes twitched, but she looked down at Jazz, her posture slowly becoming less threatening.

"Jazz, I am going to die one way or another," she said, giving her smaller guardian a fierce look. She cut his protest off sharply. "Whether it's in eighty years from old age, or tomorrow from the Decepticons and drones—I'm going to die, way sooner than you ever will."

Jazz made a whining sound, which made Sam jump a bit; he had never seen the saboteur look so upset.

Rachel continued, her glaring morphing into something softer as she dropped down to be eye level with him. "And if I'm going to die, I don't want to die like a coward," she said, voice cracking. "I don't want to be that anymore."

"You aren't a coward," Jazz insisted, still upset. He stepped a bit closer, so they were face to face, her in the air. "Rachel, I…"

"I have to do this," she said, shaking her head. "NEST needs all the experienced fighters they can get. I can help them, so I have to go."

Sam glanced at his friends nervously beside him, but everyone was focused on the other three. When he looked back, he could see Jazz was visibly searching for something to say, or do. The saboteur looked up at Thundercracker, helpless, but neither spoke.

After a moment, Jazz turned and gave Rachel a look Sam couldn't decipher. It was… desperate, but less upset.

"…You sure know how to split a spark," Jazz said, a weak smile fighting to get on his faceplates.

Rachel smiled; it wasn't kind or cruel. It was simply Rachel. "I learned from the best," she said. Sam didn't ask where that had come from, but Jazz seemed to understand.

"Don't get slagged," he said, clawed hands flexing. He gave Rachel a firm look. "Ya had better come back. You stick close t' th' soldiers an' don't go off by yerself."

"Right back at you, tinhead," Rachel shot back. She looked over him and nodded at Thundercracker. "You too, birdbrain. Don't… don't fuck up."

Thundercracker rumbled lowly and held out his hand. Rachel hovered over and stepped onto the giant palm fearlessly.

"Fight well, keep your head down, and don't be stupid," the flier ordered, tilting his helm. His green optics sent a green shadow over the human, they were so close.

That earned him a grin from the woman finally. "Who do you think I am?" she challenged.

Thundercracker smirked back. "Right."
"There won't be any fightin'," Jazz said severely. He moved into Thundercracker's space, sending a weak glare up at the two faces peering down at him. "But yeah, what he said."

Prowl's departure tore Sam's attention away from the unnatural family picture, and he suddenly realized how much he and his friends were gawking. Sam elbowed Miles in the side, making the blond teen yelp a little. Kass sent them a patient smile and turned her attention back to the heater.

It would be a long day tomorrow. A very long day. Sam didn't want to imagine Bumblebee headed out to search either, but he was a scout, so he was needed. Being stuck on the sidelines wasn't as bad as actually going. Sam knew that. He was jealous of the determination Rachel had; if he were half that brave… well, maybe he'd still be staying behind. He could imagine that would be worse in that case.

Mikaela caught his eye and he smiled at her. They couldn't do much other than wait and see what came next. He could accept that. It was what was in the cards for him, at least for now, so he couldn't do much other than let what was to come, come.

"She takes after her mom," Miles said suddenly, perked up, garnering wide attention. He grinned up at his would-be niece. "Sarah dressed up like Iron Man for Halloween last year."

Jazz's subsequent laughter and Rachel's seething ("You're not my uncle! Shut up!") made Sam feel, if anything, just a little bit lighter.

Tomorrow was another day.

0000

Decepticon Stronghold
Brig

It was almost terrifying how much like clockwork things had gone. He had been there for four days, far, far longer than he was comfortable with, even though he knew it was to their advantage to wait. But he hadn't heard a single word from his allies during that time. The silence had been terrifying, but eventually, he'd felt calm enough to relax. Galvatron hadn't come barging in with the intention of torturing him; maybe the tyrant had forgotten he was there. That was all the better. What was like clockwork, however, had nothing to do with Vortex and how he was handling his time in the brig.

Vortex had only briefly worked with Starscream and the Seekers, and he had hated every moment of it. The Combaticons were a Gestalt and were generally in the most dangerous, hardest hit areas of the war; the places Starscream had always avoided. The one time they'd worked directly under the Aerial Commander, Vortex had very clear memories of Onslaught arguing with Starscream about siege tactics. Even then the Aerial Commander had been predictable. Vortex was pleased to know he hadn't changed much.

The loud crash of the door accompanied by shouting was startling to hear after days of quiet inside the brig. It wasn't a jailer bringing him some pathetic ration; it was a prisoner being hauled in. It wasn't just another prisoner, however.

Starscream snarled loudly as the guard all but threw the disgraced Aerial Commander into his cell. Both new mechs ignored Vortex sitting there in silence, watching with a visor dimmed to hide his intense interest.

"—this is just another example of how far our great leader has gone in the processors!" Starscream all but howled. There was energon pooling from his lips; the scuffs on his jaw revealing just where a
powerful punch had hit him. "Mad with power! He's going to drive us to disaster!"

"Lord Galvatron's orders are to be followed," his guard, an unfamiliar grounder said, unimpressed.

Starscream drew back, raising his chin defiantly. "Oh, yes, follow the orders of the monstrosity whose spark was already half-way into the Well of Sparks!" he hissed. He grabbed at his damaged side when sparks suddenly erupted from a gaping wound in a brilliant shower of light. "It was Soundwave's fault anyway, blaming ME for the loss of MY Seeker squad when Galvatron all but blew them out of the sky himself!"

It was clear what had happened. Vortex watched as the jailer left before looking back at Starscream who clearly nursed both physical and emotional wounds. Starscream had gotten into fights easily with Megatron, just as he had with everyone else, but his fights with Galvatron were even worse, his allies had told him. They had known it was only a matter of time before Starscream would torque Galvatron off enough for a physical altercation to occur, thus sending Starscream to the brig for insubordination.

Just where they needed him.

You were chosen for a reason, interrogator. Only you will work.

Suddenly, things were going exactly according to plan.

"Starscream."

The other flier looked up, snarling past the energon on his faceplates, directly at the helicopter.

For the first time in over a week, Vortex grinned, straight through the energon bars at his former commander.

"We need to talk."

End Chapter 34.

Chapter End Notes

You aren't going to like me at all next week. Just prepare yourselves now.

A/Ns:
-Yes, WJ made an Iron Man suit essentially. In less than 24 hours? Yes. How? He had Wheeljack's design mostly done already, so it's mostly just additional body armor and not the complex mechanisms for flight. Also, guys, it's Wheeljack.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Everything you think you know is about to change. Too bad no one's quite ready for it just yet. Super mega awesome thanks to Shantastic for editing this!

Also, you guys? You're going to hate me some more. Good thing the next chapter will be updated on Saturday. :D Chapter 37 will be up next Wednesday.

**Warnings:** character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

**Disclaimer:** *Transformers* © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

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*Plumas NEST Base*  
7:00 AM

They were already running late, though Lennox wasn't sure who to blame just yet. Simmons had left late last night to meet the forward teams over at Robins AFB; he was in charge of organizing the search out East. Lennox and his team were focusing on the Western states, and would start the search long before Simmons; they'd decided to focus the trained NEST personnel on the locations west of the Mississippi because there were more of them, both large and small. And they were already much closer to the locations in Oregon, Montana, Texas, Colorado and British Columbia than they were to those in New York, Massachusetts, Virginia, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Alabama. But despite the fact that the first search team was scheduled to arrive in their target area at noon and everyone was doing their best to be ready for their respective departure times, Lennox felt pressured to move even faster.

Epps would move out in the third team. They had ironed out the team structures yesterday, but in the chaos of actually requisitioning and loading enough helicopters to Amedee to get his teams to the farther search locations, Lennox realized he still had to worry about certain newer team members. Their inclusion had created hurdles he'd had to overcome, and none of the problems had been created by Cybertronians.

Barnaby Rancourt had insisted on participating in some way. Understanding that he didn't have time to argue with the strength of Barns' conviction on this, Lennox had assigned him as a data tech on the reconnaissance team, but he wasn't sure how he felt about that. Sure, the kid had fought the monsters before, but he was a civilian. Luckily, Thundercracker would be escorting that team, going ahead to search the areas they were assigned to investigate for any drone activity. They couldn't *not* expect drones to attack them if they did stumble too close. They needed the firepower.

…Which unfortunately brought him to one of the other human volunteers, the one who did not need to be classified as a civilian.

He found the person he needed to see about ten minutes before the first team was supposed to move
to the choppers. Rachel stood out naturally in a crowd, with her pale complexion and constant glare, but now, she was like a beacon sitting alone on the tarmac, away from other soldiers. It was jarring to see any human looking like they wore the skin of a mech, albeit a miniature one, but she pulled it off. The blond looked up just as Lennox reached her.

"We need you in one of the first squads," he said without preamble. "Some residents near the ridges of Mount St. Hilary reported seeing odd lights several evenings in a row, so we think it has more promise as an actual drone location. We may need your firepower if we get too close."

They weren't supposed to get close to any enemies—this was just scouting—but they needed to be on their guard. Most of the mechs could fit, bi-pedal, in a helicopter, but that helicopter wouldn't carry many other troops or much in the way of armament. For a vague moment, Lennox regretted the fact that Vortex had deserted them, since a mech that could pass for a helicopter would have been extremely useful at this moment in time, but then he dismissed the thought. During the planning session, he and Epps had sat down with the other squad leaders, and they had all quickly realized that they needed more flight-capable firepower, preferably firepower that wouldn't take up an inordinate amount of space in the helicopters. In this instance, Rachel's size was her greatest asset, next to her weapons, of course.

Rachel hesitated. "But… I'm supposed to go with Jazz's team," she said.

Lennox shook his head. "WJ located a couple more likely spots, so we had to split a couple of the teams, do some shuffling around." he said, clasping her shoulder briefly in support. He couldn't blame her for being nervous, though she was actively trying to hide it by acting tough. "You still want to do this?"

The last thing he wanted was to send one of the human survivors into a violent situation, a situation they weren't prepared to handle. A lot of the information he'd gotten from Jazz about Danny had indicated that she'd never fought drones without the support of Wheeljack. Lennox couldn't afford to have her panic or break down when faced with the reality of the drones and no dad, which was why he'd refused to allow her on this mission. Rachel… was another story entirely. Apparently the kid had survived mostly alone for well over a year, finding food, shelter and hiding from the drones. And she was aggressive, determined, and unlikely to lose it when seeing the drones again for the first time in months. Although sending a kid like Rachel (because despite her age and experience, to him she was still a kid) up against the drones made him sick, as a commander, Lennox had to take what good came his way.

"Yes." Despite the fear in her eyes, Rachel nodded stiffly and didn't flinch. "You're going to need me if there are drones."

"You bet, Iron-Lady," Epps called out, startling them both, as he walked toward his own team.

Rachel, fear vanishing, never failed to jump up at a quip. "Shut the fuck up," she replied scathingly as she stood up to face Lennox.

He was dealing with machines and children. Lennox rolled his eyes and gently pushed Rachel by the shoulder toward her own designated team. "Get going, both of you!" he said. "Cooper, you're with Ferrell and Johnson."

They would start with the locations in Oregon and Montana and move on from there, see if there really were drones out there. Lennox dreaded either answer—if Barns and WJ were correct, they would face the drones soon. If they were wrong, they would all have several sleepless nights worrying about where they were. He didn't want to find the drones anywhere, but at least if they found them, they would be able to assess the risk.
He knew, though, that he would not get his wish of a life without drones. He didn't need to know the future to know that even if they didn't find a single one that day... the drones would find them.

It was only a matter of time.

0000

Northeast California
8:15 AM

They weren't going after the drones. That would be too risky, for a lot of reasons. For one, Lennox would probably be mad enough to actually punish them when they got back. Although what he would do in punishment was something neither of them had considered. Jazz and TC would also be furious however, and neither of them wanted that to happen. They knew that drones could easily overpower a single human and a mech, even though Danny and Wildrider had proven many times before they could handle at least one when they worked as a team.

No, they weren't going to a drone site, at least, not intentionally. About ten minutes into their journey she had felt guilty enough to comment on the fact that they, meaning WJ and Barns, hadn't told them where the drone sites were, so how could they hunt the drones. And even with GPS and maps, neither of them knew the terrain of Northern America very well. After discussing their tactics, they'd acknowledged that they should stay relatively close to Plumas at first, and had set up a search grid to make sure they didn't miss anything. But she knew that as they eliminated areas near the base, they would have to go out further.

Vortex was out there. Somewhere. There had been no reports of an unidentified helicopter anywhere in the area, so their group had theorized that Vortex had remained on the ground, traveling through the dense natural woods in the area. That made sense. They had spent so many years walking around on foot, even if he'd had his flight fully restored and been given a full tank of energon, Vortex would probably be more comfortable walking.

That all made sense in Danny's head, though she knew that NEST would sincerely disagree. She didn't care if they disagreed, however. She was more interested in finding her friend than in playing nice with NEST.

Wildrider had been a genius to suggest this, and they had decided to slip away after the first search team departed. While NEST was busy finding the drones, no one would be looking for poor Vortex. It had been five days already, and nothing had been done except small local searches. She knew Jazz and Thundercracker had made the difficult decision not to push for a more thorough search; they had opted out for the simple reason that Vortex had left out because he needed space. They couldn't rush him, couldn't force him to come back and act like he was happy around all those people. They had decided to let him come back when he was ready.

Danny knew he'd come back. He had to. They were a family. He knew that was true, and he knew there was always a place for him with them. That would never change, no matter what year, or where in space they were.

"No sign in this sector," Wildrider announced over his radio as they made a smooth curve, following the sleek black outline of the road. Danny liked how roads looked here, though every time she saw a car coming the opposite way, it boggled her mind. She immediately thought they were mechs first.

Sighing, Danny put down the binoculars she had "borrowed" from Lieutenant Epps' supplies. "Maybe sticking to the roads is a bad idea," she said. "He wouldn't be close to the roads, would he?"
Wildrider agreed and at a point where the sporadically placed guard rails ended, they stopped. Danny stretched as she got out of Wildrider, allowing him to transform and quickly get into the shelter of the trees. They didn't need to be scaring the rare passerby.

"I wonder where we are?" she asked, peering around. The woods all looked the same. Her breath fogged in the air. She was glad she had brought her parka and gloves.

"Sixty-miles north of base perimeter," Wildrider answered. He cracked his neck and seemed to focus a bit on something internally, possibly the map. "Uhh, just woods. No big city. No human buildings at all."

Danny nodded. "That's good, I guess. More places for him to hide, for sure." Just like home…

"Right."

They went on into the woods, which all seemed to be filled with hugely tall evergreens and patches of thick undergrowth. Danny didn't mind having dirt underfoot again. It felt… natural, to hear twigs snapping and to feel the gentle recoil of wet earth under her heel. It only made her more determined to keep looking for her friend. They'd all be together, but never soon enough.

"I hope he's not mad. Or hurt," she said, huffing from exertion. The cold made it harder to breathe sometimes. "I feel so bad."

"Don't," Wildrider replied, waving his hand absently. As they made their way deeper into the woods, the undergrowth was less and the branches were higher up on the trees, making it easier for him to maneuver. "This, this is just minor fight. Ve find him, tell him it's okay to come home, and ve go home."

Danny had to smile. "Yeah…" She hesitated. "And then get our asses handed to us by Jazz and Kass."


A soft laugh escaped her lips and Danny shook her head. Maybe they would get in trouble… but it was worth it. If they got their family back together, it was totally worth it—

They both froze, Danny in mid-step, when something rang out across the nearly silent forest. It wasn't loud. It was more like the clang of something hitting metal. It could have been human. It could have been anything.

But they knew better. They had to know better, after so many years.

"…What was that?" she asked, heart pounding faster. Instantly, the hair on her arms and neck were up, her breath quickened, and Danny found herself scanning the dense woods with increased awareness.

Just like home.

Wildrider's engine hissed as he moved to the side, optics piercing through the landscape, focusing on a hill dotted with some fir trees. "Do not speak," he said softly. He sounded serious, a rare and dangerous state for Wildrider to be in. He motioned behind him. "Stay here."

Danny didn't flinch. "No," she hissed softly, edging closer. Her hands grasped at the air; she didn't even have a weapon with her, because they hadn't been looking for any trouble.
Wildrider turned and stared at her. His optics seemed to pierce right through her, seeing things she couldn't.

He turned away without another word. Danny took that as him accepting her tagging along. She trusted him, just like he trusted her.

It could have been anything, like a deer, or even humans. They were in a new world, a world where the wilderness seemed to still be part of the human domain. Danny would have taken a rogue wild animal or a wayward human over anything else that might lurk in the woods. She remembered their encounter with Blitzwing years ago—or was that years ahead of them now—and shivered.

She prayed fiercely for it to be Vortex. He would be a welcome sight indeed.

Danny tried to move quietly over the dead pine needles. Wildrider was even more quiet; she couldn't even hear his engines. The only real noise was the occasional stick or dead plants they ended up crushing underfoot. Danny kept up as best she could with her larger friend, though she knew to give him decent space. If they ran into trouble, Wildrider had to be able to react, fast.

They approached the hill and Wildrider ducked low, creeping up the low incline with the grace of a wild cat. Danny's breath seemed loud to her ears as she fought the cold air and the sudden fear choking her. She reached the peak of the hill after Wildrider did, but he didn't reveal anything about what he was seeing. He stood up more, using a large oak tree as cover, and Danny dared to stand up completely, unable to see past so many of the trees.

They were standing just at the edge of a large ravine, a miniature valley. Danny had at first been enraptured by the sight of the ruined treetops parallel to them; their charred tops seemed so odd in the middle of the woods.

And then…

And then, she saw it. She saw them.

Danny knew standing still was foolish. They may have had decent cover, but it wouldn't last. She couldn't look away after her eyes trailed down to the bottom of the ravine. Fear and shock pinned her body.

"...rider..." Danny began, voice quaking. Wildrider stood up taller, optics fixed on the sight before them.

These... these weren't the drones she had known.

"Oh, Primus," she whispered, terrified.

Beside her, Wildrider's frame thrummed with some sort of emotion. Danny wished she could hold his hand, because she wanted to, fiercely.

Out of the shallow pit, they could see what had to be some sort of drop ship or container, which had burned the trees when it finally crashed into the ravine and split the earth. The container was open, but clearly small in size. Danny could only see five creatures, which weren't flying. They crawled on thin, fast legs and moved across the earth like a bug would. In the front of their round bodies, they had what seemed like additional arm-like appendages. They were swarming over one spot on the ground, but as the two watchers on the hill observed in silence, the drones moved back, toward another patch of ground.

In their wake, they left a brand new silver ball. It trembled and shook—before bursting outward with
a shriek of life, a new one-eyed monster. It rose on the same legs and hurried after the larger mass to help with production.

They were making each other. They were—

They made each other. They replicated constantly because that's what they did when they landed. Wheeljack had had all sorts of theories and ideas about how the drones never seemed to wane in number. In fact, they only seemed to increase. This was why. They were taking the metal from the ship and just kept building each other.

That's how they had won. That's why the Autobots and the humans had never been able to kill them all.

But why… why did the ones Danny knew of fly? Unless—

The newer one had the same strange front hand-things and legs. Danny watched, edging as close as she dared, to watch through the curtain of trees, hoping her father would give her guidance, to know how to look at the creatures. Why did they have legs? She wracked her brain in desperation. This was new, something odd; she had to figure it out.

She watched them make two more, the production lightning fast. By the third one, they had stopped and started to drag metal off the ship, in a different pattern than before. This one had the long body, like the ones Danny was used to seeing. But then, they went and made another legged drone. As they worked, Danny began to understand.

The legged ones seemed able to move far and wide very fast. They would have to, once the metal on the ship ran out. Eventually, however, they would be making the fliers to truly move far across the planet.

In the back of her mind, Danny was faintly sure she heard Wheeljack say, "Fascinating!"

They were a fragging assembly line. They'd keep making workers until they had enough of them to make the fliers, and then the fliers… would go out, on their mission to destroy. Danny swallowed against a dry throat, heart pounding furiously. It was obvious now; the workers were the ones with legs, since they couldn't travel as far as the fliers. But the fliers couldn't build new drones alone, without those helpful front appendages.

Holy slag, she had to get this back to Barns and Prowl. They had to know this.

Danny tried to edge away from the hill quietly, knowing Wildrider hadn't moved an inch. If they took out the worker drones, then they wouldn't have to worry about the fliers building more. Then they could simply kill the remaining fliers without the fear of more being built! It was—it was perfect!

Turning, Danny dared to grin up at her friend, who was still watching the drones warily. They had to move quickly, to make sure the information got back to the proper authorities, plus avoiding letting the drones make too many fliers too soon.

"'Rider," she whispered, reaching out to him. "Come on, let's go—"

All at once, Wildrider's facial expression changed. He snarled, weapons transforming instantly. Danny froze and whirled around.

On the edge of the crater, one of the legged drones was perched. It's red optic—oh-so-familiar—pierced through the murky air and Danny felt her heart tremble and nearly stop entirely as she gazed
straight back at it.

Oh, no.

With a terrifying shriek, the swarm below regrouped and lunged.

0000

On Board Decepticon Shuttle
Siberia, 12:00 AM

Starscream was gone the following morning. The Seeker had said nothing to the mech who released him, and certainly nothing to Vortex who sat silently in his own cell. Vortex, who patiently waited alone in the brig, in darkness and silence, until his chronometer reached midnight exactly.

And then, right on time, everything went to Hell.

Vortex was up and moving the second he heard the blaring alarms over the loudspeakers. He heard distant shouts about an attack on the outside of the shuttle, but Vortex focused his attention on his jail cell floor, right in front of the glowing energon bars that held him prisoner.

He dug his fingers into the seam between the second and third panels from the left, bringing up the intricate schematics his allies had given him. He was pleased to see that when the metal gave way, he had access to an auxiliary control panel. He hacked in quickly, using the override codes. His prayer that the codes would work was granted and with a hiss, the bars vanished.

He had very little time and he had to move quickly. He had minimal access to his weapons, not that they would be particularly useful on a ship full of enemies, but he would feel better if he had more firepower. Vortex went flush against the side of the brig entrance, waiting until he couldn't hear any movement or shouting outside. He slid out into the nearly dark corridor and brought up the map of the ship, the one he'd spent his brig time studying to figure out the best ways to travel through the ship unobserved.

He had to get to the command center, at the opposite end of the ship. Galvatron could be there, if he hadn't gone off the ship to deal with this attack himself, but he wasn't the objective. No matter how much dark vengeance pulled at his spark, Vortex had other duties to attend to before he could take his revenge.

He didn't dare call out to his allies yet, not trusting the communication lines. Instead, Vortex took off down the corridor, praying fiercely that he wouldn't run into major resistance.

He had twenty minutes.

At minute nineteen, he turned a corner and ran directly into Soundwave.

0000

Above Oregon Air Space
Near Mount St. Hilary
9:45 AM

Rachel was willing to admit, to herself and others, that being the first one to do anything was scary. She wasn't keen on the fact she had suddenly been assigned to the first group of soldiers sent out to look for drones. She was even less pleased to be stuck in a non-sentient helicopter, going it alone up north.
She knew their forces were spread horribly thin, since most of the Autobots couldn't fly, so aside from some internal grumblings about how useful Vortex would be right now, she couldn't really complain. It was still unnerving to be headed toward some random mountain range in Oregon with only two other men and a flying suit she wasn't entirely sure she was able to pilot correctly.

They were in a small helicopter, probably for observation or something. Rachel was more concerned about how sturdy the whole thing was and how close they were to the tops of the trees. She was used to flying, but she was not used to flying inside something headed toward a potential battle.

She ended up sitting next to the soldier named Ferrell, in the seat behind the pilot. He'd told her his first name, but it had gotten lost in the sound of take-off. His last name was stenciled on his jacket, though.

"You ever fly in a helicopter before, kid?" he asked over the noise, amused.

Rachel grinned back, mostly sarcastic. "You could say that," she said. Her helicopter was sentient and could stand up; this one was nothing at all compared to that.

She pulled her mask down and tried to remember how to work on the settings on the HUD. Of course, WJ had made things overly complicated, but he had showed her how to bypass a lot of the extraneous features. She couldn't read the random bits of Cybertronian text that showed up either, which was annoying, because sometimes the directives on the screen were a jumble of both English and the alien cyphers.

But it would have to do. They hadn't had time to fix the tiny details, and as long as she knew how to fly the contraption, that was good enough. Rachel reluctantly left the settings alone, knowing that it had been fine before. She had to trust that the technology would continue to work as it had when she'd practiced with WJ. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to use it at all.

They were nearly two hours into the second leg of their flight, and Rachel still had no idea where the hell she was. All she could see were the tops of trees passing alarmingly close below them. She didn't like being in the helicopter. She couldn't see anything, though she assumed they had radar up front. She was still trying to figure out how to use hers... if she had one. All of the controls were so complex.

"How long have you known the aliens?" Ferrell suddenly asked.

Rachel hesitated and considered not saying anything. "Since I was ten," she said ultimately. She forced herself to keep looking at him. "Jazz and TC saved me."

"I can't even imagine," Ferrell said, sounding bemused. He shook his head. "You trust them? You know, in the end, to help us?"

He obviously didn't know whom he was speaking to. Rachel thought about his question, even though the answer wasn't difficult to come up with. What was difficult was admitting it. "...Yes," she said at length. "I trust them."

She trusted Jazz and Thundercracker far beyond what she was even capable of admitting to herself. She trusted all of her friends—her family—metal or flesh. Even if the Autobots screwed up, Rachel trusted her friends to do their best to fix things. She didn't want them to... it was too risky. But she was out there trying now, too.

Rachel closed her eyes and tried to push the images of her friends out of her mind. She had to focus. Her stomach was in knots and her nerves were borderline shot... but she had chosen this path.
"Hold up, hold up, we have movement," the pilot said over the comm. Rachel looked up at the front of the chopper, uneasy. The soldier was calm, however, completely professional. "Negative on visual. Ferrell, what can you see?"

Ferrell leaned toward the side door that was open, looking out into the open forest air. "Nothing on our port," he called back. Rachel strained her ears to listen for any sounds over the propellers. She couldn't hear anything suspicious, but that didn't mean anything when it came to either one of their enemies.

"Check the starboard side," the pilot said. He started to direct the helicopter more to the side, headed upward slightly. "Plumas Base, this is NEST Kiowa 1 reporting movement along eastward ridge. I repeat, movement on radar was detected, but now there's silence."

Rachel tried to see anything from the door as Ferrell moved over to check their right side. If there were drones, well, she might have to jump out and lure them away. She didn't want to do that, but that was why she was there. They definitely couldn't outrun a swarm in this chopper. She leaned forward against the pressure of her seat belt, heart thudding.

All at once, things seemed to grow quiet even beyond the throbbing of the blades. Rachel looked up, afraid to speak.

In front, the pilot gasped. "What the fuck is that thing—?" he yelled, startling his passengers. There was a loud screech that fought for dominance over the din caused by the blades that kept them aloft.

Rachel had just enough time to realize something was horribly wrong—and then everything exploded into fire and metal.

0000

Northeast California
9:45 AM

It didn't matter. It didn't matter if the drones no longer flew. They... they were all the same. All the same machines of death.

Danny had no weapons. She could not fight. She couldn't even run—because the drones were always faster. Wildrider could fight them, but even with the few weapons he had, at best he could only hope to keep them at bay, to give Danny time to run and escape. He knew she wouldn't run, though. Danny would always be there, waiting for him. His only hope was to kill the drones before the drones killed them.

Wildrider roared as the drones trained their sights on the two of them. He brought his cannons down and fired rapidly into the ravine, the explosive sound rattling the woods that had been so quiet before. The drones dodged, even though he could tell they were slower than the ones from the future-past. They lacked the speed their flight had given them, though they were just as nimble.

The trees were going to be a problem. Wildrider shot one, snapping it and sending it flying down into the ravine. It smashed into the carrier pod, but the drones scattered. Hissing, Wildrider turned and found Danny frozen by the trunk of another tree, her eyes filled with fear. He could not have her there with him; he wouldn't be able to focus if he left her alone up here while he jumped down to destroy the drones.

"GET TO ROAD, NOW!" he shouted, startling her. "DO NOT ARGUE, JUST GO!"

Danny opened her mouth to speak. "I don't—WILDRIDER!" she suddenly screamed, noticing
something else. She pointed behind him with a fearful expression. "$\text{LOOK!}$"

He spun around and struggled to find their enemies through the trees. It wasn't hard to spot the silver metal amid the brown colors of the forest, but when Wildrider did finally hone in on the drones, he wasn't entirely sure what he was looking at.

Instead of rushing to attack like they would have before, the drones rushed toward each other. They collided without any sort of friction, besides the minor scraping of metal against metal. Instead of recoiling from each other... they disappeared into each other. The workers and the half built fliers suddenly turned into a moving, shifting sphere of metal, a loathsome cry rising from the pile of drones.

This wasn't... normal. Wildrider dared to take a step forward as they watched with unease.

"...What... are they doing?" he asked, barely above a whisper. The drones had never done this before. It was like... they were a combiner team, but they weren't. At least, they hadn't been before.

Danny reached out and touched his leg, voice instead rising to a frantic pitch. "$\text{Let's go. Come on... let's go!}$"

He almost did. Maybe in all of this chaos, they'd had the chance to run, but the moment came and went, however. It all happened so fast. Wildrider couldn't believe it.

The drones were combining. Wildrider stared at the creatures in awe as their frames twisted and dipped low into each other, their mass seemingly doubling as the flurry of motion grew upwards—as their final frame grew into something recognizably alien.

Screeching, the mouth of the beast emerged from the cascading metal, razors making up its teeth. Its shriek shot through the air faster than a bullet and Wildrider actually stumbled backwards. He didn't know what to keep his focus on more—the mouth, or the limbs that formed almost out of thin air, or the sheer size that only seemed to grow taller and taller, casting the crater in dark shadow.

Behold now the behemoth that I have fashioned—

His is the first of God's ways; only his Maker can draw His sword against him.

Wildrider couldn't think of anything else at that moment. Nothing seemed to matter except this monster, as he watched it form. He knew he should run, or at least try to, but he could not look away.

Behind him, Danny made a gasping noise and it grounded him. It cleared his mind, even as he slowly turned his head back and stared down at the monstrosity that stood now in the dell, watched as the last ripples flowed across its silver back, the transformation finally complete. It stepped forward, with a grace that belied its mass, though the tremors from the impacts shook the ground.

Wildrider watched and stared. The single red optic that stared back up at him pierced the cold air and set it on fire with barely restrained violence. One of its front clawed feet rested on top of the fallen tree trunk—before crushing it with one move.

It was a horrific looking thing. It could easily rip him apart, he reasoned.

But they had made one very serious mistake. A fatal one.

They had given up flight... and taken to the ground. And while the drones were masters of the air—
Wildrider ruled the road.

He threw himself headlong into the ravine and embraced war once again. The drone monster—it couldn't be called a mech, nor a true drone—shrieked and met him head on. It had guns under its chest like the drones did, but its powerful limbs were the most direct threat. Wildrider ignored the magnesium strength bullets that ripped through his armor, which was stronger after months of recovery among NEST. He focused on the limbs.

This was the sort of battle he had missed, a fight between mechs, where there were limbs to tear and energon to send flying. The trees stood no chance as Wildrider kicked one down to roll into the abomination. It made contact, but the drones shrugged it off and lunged for Wildrider. The black-and-red mech snarled as the powerful claws swiped at his legs. He knew if he stumbled, he was dead.

It was a battle between titans. Wildrider tried to avoid getting his feet caught up in the trees that fell beneath them. He grabbed hold of the monster's front leg, attempting to haul the whole creature closer. He could see a weakness in its underbelly, if he could only reach it.

The leg swung out of his grip too fast, the body capable of oscillating its different halves. Wildrider snarled as he tried to grab it again, ignoring the piercing of the bullets, but was sent to the side, falling over trees, when the leg swept his own feet out from under him. Sound vanished briefly as his helm slammed into the dirt and he scrambled to right himself.

There was a crack, from the trees, but it wasn't because of their fight. Wildrider was shocked when a tree came rolling down the side of the ravine and collided with the drone monster, causing it to stumble.

Stunned, he tried to figure out where the log had come from. He heard the ragged, telltale signs of human breathing, the sound of sneakers kicking against yet another log, and he remembered: Danny. The drones had forgotten her too, but not anymore.

Wildrider tried to turn around, but it was too late. The drone machine open fired at the top of the ravine and he heard Danny scream as bullets tore up the landscape. Wildrider's spark constricted with fear. He barely caught sight of his human friend among the smoke at the top of the hill, but at least she was still intact from what he could tell.

Danny disappeared into the cloud of dirt and Wildrider screamed in rage. He lunged to his feet and slammed into the monster. It lashed out, easily reaching around with its claws to strike back at him. Wildrider slammed his fists down over and over again, beating the arms away from him.

He had forgotten.

Forgotten this.

The beast screamed and it was like a splash of cold nitrogen to his engines. It gave him clarity. It gave him realization.

Something hot and cold flashed through his chest.

"I AM WILDRIDER."

He sank his talons into the seams of the mechanical beast and yanked back, roaring. He felt the earth tremble beneath them as the creature thrashed. For the first time in many, many years, he felt the fire of a darker age return to his spark.
He was Wildrider.

He was a Stunticon.

He was a Decepticon.

*And he was created to destroy.*

And today… today he finally realized the truth. He was created to destroy, to destroy everything and anything he wished—because he had control, not Motormaster or Megatron or anyone else—

So, today, he chose to destroy in order to *protect.*

He thought about Danny. About Wheeljack. About all of his friends—Barns' kindness, Kass and her gentleness, Rachel's acceptance. He thought of Arcee and what she meant to him. He thought of his brothers, long dead, broken down by the very descendants of the beast he was tearing into. The thoughts and memories gave him the strength to ignore the claws that returned his strikes with flawless intensity. They allowed him to ignore the gashes to his chest and the warning signs flashing in his HUD.

He could only see his enemy and could only feel the dark fire of vengeance pulsing through his spark, and it drove him beyond his breaking point. He could only think about destroying what was beneath him. He would do that—and nothing less.

The drone monster rolled and Wildrider hit the ground. He was already rolling over and with a furious roar, he lunged right back at the drone. He collided with its underbelly, ignoring how it left his own back exposed to the pummeling limbs of the monster.

He went for the spark. He sank his claws again and again into the softer metal, scouring it for a weakness. The drones had never had a weakness when they were in a pack, providing themselves with a mobility and flexibility that solid creatures didn't have. Combined into a single entity, however, removed that advantage. Wildrider ripped, bending metal, drawing it away in strips, never losing sight of his goal. His fury gave him an edge the drones had never had in their soulless, sparkless states.

At the same moment he felt something give way on his lower back, Wildrider howled with triumph as his claws caved through the chest cavity and the drone monster tried to flinch away from its discovered vulnerability.

Images of his brothers flashed through his cortex. Wildrider's internal scream of despair and rage disappeared into the cannon fire as his transformed fist unleashed round after round after round into the exposed chest. The monster's shrieks of agony fueled Wildrider's fervor even more. He went down with the behemoth as it flailed backwards, now intent on escaping instead of attacking. Wildrider kept firing over and over, remaining pinned to its monstrous side.

A leg found him and threw him backwards. Wildrider stumbled and nearly fell, but he righted himself immediately, whirling around, firing repeatedly. Each blast that hit the wounded creature felt like it wasn't enough. Wildrider kept firing, mercilessly barraging the monster as it tried and failed every time to get back up.

With one last effort, the creature managed to get to its feet, though one of its legs was missing an ankle. Wildrider forgot any sense of sanity left in him. He dove and grabbed the monster's jaw, yanking it back until something audibly cracked. He shoved his cannon into its throat and fired. The whole body flew backwards and he dared to stand and watch.
The behemoth fell. It crashed into the earth, sending a wave of rock and soil up like water. Wildrider stared at the fallen beast and waited. Energon pooled out from its chest. The red optic grayed.

It didn't move. There was no life left in its alien frame. He waited, until he was struck with the realization that he couldn't hear anything. The forest was once again cast into silence.

Slowly, Wildrider felt the battle lust ebb away. He released his clenched fists with effort. His joints felt stiff from over taut hydraulics.

The first real thought to enter his processors was, Where is Danny?

But that didn't matter. Nothing did, because the moment his thoughts turned from pure sensation to some sense of control and sanity—everything hit him.

He had no strength to ignore the tidal wave of pain that struck, as if the battle itself had been the only thing keeping it at bay. Wildrider didn't have the strength to cry out as warning signals he had been pushing away took advantage of the crippling sense of agony racing through his body and clouded his vision. Energon levels decreasing, reaching critical levels, left optic impaired, main hydraulic line in right leg disabled, energy levels falling—

Wildrider didn't remember falling to his knees. He found himself staring at the dirt and felt his processors slip slowly… slowly away from his grasp. Internally, he urged himself to stand.

But realistically, he knew he could not. He would not again. Wildrider felt things slow as he slipped forward even more. His chest scraped the dull earth. Everything inside of him and outside of him screamed. Sinking clawed hands into the dirt, Wildrider couldn't even do that for long, as his body began to shut down.

So… this was what an Autobot felt like. Foolish, and yet…

Strangely alive.

He wanted to see Danny again. And Wheeljack. And Arcee.

But he would not.

Wildrider let his body slowly drop down further and further. He had no power left to lift himself up. He resigned his spark to the ground. Footsteps—made heavy by effort—approached. He saw his tiny friend make her unsteady way toward him, covered in dirt and blood, but there all the same. That was enough to dispel any remaining shreds of fear.

He accepted this now.

With some degree of difficulty, Danny curled in his hand, shivering. Wildrider's wandering remaining optic fell onto her tiny, tiny form, and his vision flickered dangerously. Danny, breathing harshly, grabbed onto his energon-stained hands, wrapping her arms around his fingers as if they were everything that would keep her alive now. Wildrider wanted to grip her back, but he didn't have the strength.

"We'll be okay," she whispered. "We'll be okay. All right, 'Rider? We're going to be okay."

Wildrider wanted to believe that, too. But perhaps that was too much to hope for.

Danny drew in on herself, her teeth chattering from either pain or cold. "I'll… sing you that song you liked, okay?" she continued, desperate. "Do you remember the song?"
He didn't know if he answered her; everything seemed like an insurmountable task. He wanted to hear the song. The words. He wanted to hear the words.

"I-it was about Christmas. You always liked Christmas, so let's sing about it now." Danny closed her eyes, taking deep, shuddering breaths. "Sing with me, okay? Or at least... say the words."

Wildrider wasn't even sure he remembered them.

"Stille... Nacht... heilige Nacht..." Danny murmured, her singing warbling as her voice struggled to find strength. Wildrider felt something crack beneath his chestplates and he sank down further.

Danny kept singing. The tiny words were indiscernible sometimes, when the wind blew too strongly, but Wildrider could hear the murmurs. It was like humming. Or perhaps that was him who was humming. He felt his chest rumble and his optics failed, letting him have the pretense of closing weary eyes.

"Alles schläft... einsam wacht... Nur das traute hochheilige Paar... Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar..."

A spasm rocked Wildrider's body and he let out a low hissing sigh. Warning signs plagued his mind, but he pushed them away. He wanted to hear the words.

"Hirten erst... kundgemacht... Durch der Engel... Engel Halleluja..."

He was pretty sure he was losing energon. Everything felt fuzzy.

"Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht... Gottes Sohn, o wie lacht..."

Tiny hands gripped tighter to his metal skin, but he couldn't feel them anymore.

Sleep in heavenly peace.

Briefly, Wildrider wondered if this was what Goddard and Wheeljack had felt.

"Lieb' aus deinem... göttlichen... Mund... Da uns schlägt die... rettende Stund'..."

The world grew and then shrank to the size of nothing—the music carried him into darkness.

End Chapter 35.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns:
- The song she's singing is "Silent Night," in German.
- Time zones suck.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for your patience! :) Many thanks to Shantastic as usual!

DRAMA! Oh, so much of it. Arcee, you're kinda cool now. Some things happen. Brace yourselves.

**Warnings**: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

**Disclaimer**: *Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Northeastern California*

*10 AM*

It was the worst thing that could have happened. Arcee almost thought she was dreaming again, trapped in a world conceived only by organic minds.

But this was reality. This was her reality. This… was really happening.

Wildrider and Danny had disappeared just as the search teams had been deployed. She had almost expected something of the sort to happen; the two of them had been unusually compliant about the fact that they were not allowed to participate in the search teams. She'd known they were planning something. Arcee thought of warning Jazz about the situation, but could never seem to find a time when he wasn't busy. She'd decided to keep an eye on them herself, but they'd slipped away from the base when she was helping to coordinate flights to Amedee. Annoyed, she had sent a series of angry messages to the racecar only to realize that he had either turned his comm. link off, or he was already out of range.

Unable to find Jazz in the confusion, she'd told Prowl that the two of them were gone, likely out looking for Vortex, and… things had changed. Prowl had summoned WJ, who warned them that some of the prospective drone sites were located within the boundaries of the national forest, close to where he thought the two would start their search. That meant that Danny and Wildrider were really going alone into drone territory, intentionally or not, and that had scared Arcee senseless, as well as the others.

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By this time both Thundercracker and Jazz had been informed of the situation, and Prowl had reassigned Ratchet, Hoist and Bluestreak from a drone search team to go look for their missing dynamic duo. Jazz had urged her to go with them; He couldn't go himself, and if it was Wildrider acting up, they'd need her to talk him back down. As the Plumas search team assembled, Arcee hadn't expected to see Kass too, but then she realized that Kass was the only human from their family who could accompany them; Barns clearly wanted to, but his role as data tech meant he had to at least stay onsite at Plumas and guide the search teams.
It seemed unnecessary at first, but as they drove as fast as they could through the California back roads miles from base, Arcee started to worry that Kass' intervention might also be necessary. As stubborn as he was, she still hadn't expected Wildrider to maintain radio silence for quite so long unless he had to. But they'd been following narrow, twisting, mountain roads for over an hour now, and three hours of radio silence was far too long.

::Nothing.:: Ratchet swore angrily as they reached the closest location Jazz had indicated as a drone site and saw nothing but trees and heard nothing but the sound of water running in a stream. ::Where the frag could they be?::

Kane made a disapproving sound through the radio. He and Kass were in one of the military jeeps, so the Autobots would have the freedom to transform if they ran into trouble. "Rancourt said that they think the actual drone sites could be anywhere within a five klick radius of the original location," he said. "That's a thirty square mile search area for each location and there are two more possible locations within this forest. We're literally looking at sixty thousand acres of land here."

"They have to be somewhere. Think," Kass added, sounding desperate, just like Arcee felt. "Roads. To search, they'll stick to the roads. Wildrider's speed would require it."

::True....:: Arcee struggled to keep pace with the jeep as they drove through the back roads. She wanted to speed ahead, but they had to search carefully. ::but they wouldn't stay on the road if they ran into trouble. Too exposed. They are both used to living and fighting in woods, so they would move off the road. But if they got into trouble, why wouldn't he be answering his comm.?::

Ratchet's engine snarled loudly. ::I don't know. Maybe... wait:: Suddenly, the medic started to slow, forcing their caravan to reduce their speed. He then slammed on the brakes entirely, causing Arcee to veer to the side. ::Hold on!::

Immediately, Arcee transformed and brought up her cannons. The military jeep stopped and the other mechs also transformed. Given the time of year and the remoteness of the location, their presence on the road wouldn't be noticed if they weren't there for too long.

"What is it, Ratch?" Hoist asked, confused. Arcee couldn't hear or sense anything nearby. Her radar was clear.

Ratchet's medical scanners were, by default, stronger. "I'm detecting a faint energon signature nearby. Everyone freeze," he said, irritably.

The two humans had leaned out of their doors, watching warily. Arcee continued to scan the still forest around them for any signs of movement. The only real sounds were from their heated engines sizzling in the cold mountain air—

Ratchet suddenly growled and took off for the trees. "This way, quickly!"

Bluestreak leaped up and followed, the others hurrying to follow as well. "Is it them?" the sniper asked, alarmed. Arcee waited until the humans scurried ahead of her before flanking them for protection.

"I can't tell," Ratchet said, sounding frustrated. They all strode (or jogged for the humans' cases) up a small incline. The trees were thick in this section of the woods. "It's so faint. It keeps going in and out of my radar."

"I'm not picking anything up," Arcee said, trying to keep calm.

Ratchet shook his helm and motioned at the small knoll. "Up this hill. Quickly."
"I'll notify base on the way," Kane announced, taking out a walkie-talkie from his belt before moving off to the side as they trudged along. "I may have to get back to the car, but you guys keeping searching for the kid and the mech."

"We must consider the possibility that Wildrider rushed ahead," Ratchet suddenly broke in, frowning. "Splitting up to search for two persons may be necessary."

Kass turned a bright shade of red, this time from anger rather than fear. "You have to be kidding me," she began, practically snarling. Her aggression startled Ratchet and Arcee both.

However, it was Bluestreak's mirrored anger that truly shocked the Autobots present.

"If you are suggesting Wildrider ran away, from Danny of all people, you are completely out of your processors!" he snapped, doorwings flaring up in anger. Ratchet would never, ever looked cowed by anyone, even the Prime, but he did back off calmly.

"I'm just postulating a possible theory that that thick-headed race-junkie decided to run ahead to chase down something he thought he could take on alone!" he said, irritable as well. "We can continue to search the area broadly. We need to find Danielle, however, no exceptions."

"Wait… guys!" Hoist exclaimed further down the hill, shocking them. "Ratchet, we have a problem!"

Everyone simultaneously froze—and then reacted. Arcee shot forward past one more large tree and saw Hoist standing on a relatively flat piece of land, pointing at something not too far ahead of him. At first, Arcee thought it was just a junk pile left by campers. There was a huge patch of silver metal that could have been a real creature—but the colored metal was far more obvious.

It was only then she realized it was a mech, torn to pit and back.

And not just a mech.

In the hand of the miserable pile of metal was a human. Arcee almost screamed.

Kass was able to speak first of their horrified group, breaking into a run. "Danny!" she cried, nearly throwing herself down the slope to reach the ungodly sight. She nearly fell into Danny, who was motionless in the hand. "Danny! Oh, God, Danny, can you hear me?"

Arcee rolled up quickly, Ratchet and Bluestreak rushing in behind her. She watched as Kass desperately searched for signs of life.

"Danielle…" the femme began, trembling. She dared to move closer, fearing what she'd see. "Oh, Primus, is she—?"

"She's alive!" Kass suddenly exclaimed. She sounded near tears. "Thank God! Thank God, she's alive!"

Kane had knelt down next to her and seemed to be inspecting Danny, who was unconscious, but thankfully intact. "I-I don't see any major injuries, but she could have internal bleeding," he said, glancing up at Ratchet hurriedly. "We have to get her to medical care, ASAP."

"I'll take her!" Bluestreak quickly offered, already edging back toward the road, sounding frantic. "I'm the fastest mech here, faster than your jeep, so let's hurry!"

Kane nodded and gently bundled Danny into his arms, wary about jostling any injuries. Arcee
watched in muted horror at the sight of the human. She looked broken. Pale, blood covering her one arm all the way down from the shoulder…

Still on the ground, Kass was still fighting tears. "I don't know anything about human injuries. Oh, God…"

"Stay with the others," Kane said, glancing back at her as the mechs made way for him to reach Bluestreak at the road. "Your friend will be okay. I know first aid and can focus on her while Bluestreak drives. The sooner we get her to medical care, the better, so we can't wait around with her. And your other friend is still missing."

"I—I..." Kass trailed off, looking absolutely torn as she watched the soldier reach Bluestreak, clearly wanting to leave with them. However, as she turned around, the medic-in-training quickly noticed something else to focus her attention on. Her eyes filled with horror and she stumbled forward past Ratchet with a terrified expression. "Oh, God... 'Rider...!"

All at once, the muted horror over Danny's injuries was shoved aside for a much more potent sensation of fresh fear. Arcee spun around from watching Kane leave and tried to understand what had startled Kass.

'Rider.

Wildrider.

Slowly, the femme lifted her gaze and saw for the first time what they had all missed: the identity of the mech who had been cradling Danny that whole time. At first glance, the mound of silver and red had seemed to be one large mech, though there didn't seem to be much left of it, but now that her wide optics could focus on something besides her injured organic friend, she saw that some of that mess of metal was Wildrider, lying prone on the ground, torn up to near incomprehensible levels.

Oh... Primus.

Kass made another horrified sound that was caught between a gasp and a wail, and the others moved. Ratchet surged forward and nearly shoved the human away from the wreckage. Arcee could barely tell what he was doing. She was entranced by the metal. It was in shreds. Wildrider was in pieces.

"Is he functional?" Hoist asked, walking closer to check himself. Arcee just stared downwards, speechless.

"Barely," Ratchet said, frustration welling up visibly. He scanned the downed mech and seemed to be going through some kind of mental struggle. "It's not good. He's dying. His spark is failing."

Kass made a strangled sound and covered her face with her hands. She then got up and rushed back to where they had left the military jeep. Arcee... Arcee just kept staring, as if the sight before her would eventually disappear.

He was dying?

Wildrider was dying?

Slowly, Arcee moved forward until Wildrider was right beneath her. She crouched and found herself staring into his lifeless optics.

He was dying.
Arcee stared at the broken mech, her optics taking in every oozing wound and rip in his armor plating, and yet she felt and saw nothing. It was as if she was teetering on the edge of a cliff, about to fall into a chasm. She was beginning to slip—slip into...

"Save him," she said, trembling. She barely heard herself; the field was quiet enough, however, that her voice was noticeable.

"What?" Ratchet asked, turning to her. The look on his face—the surprise, confusion, the disapproval—gleamed down on her and the mech that she had grown to know as a friend, as family—

And suddenly, Arcee felt something in her processors snap.

"Save him. Please, help him," she said, shaking even more now. She gripped at Wildrider's shoulder, the only part of him still whole. "Please, Ratchet—"

Ratchet hesitated and had the decency to look apologetic. "Arcee, his spark has already reached critical lockdown. Repairs won't fix that, not to mention that we have no idea how many resources we will need for the returning soldiers—," he began with a deep frown, but the rage in Arcee's spark wouldn't let him finish.

"SAVE HIM!" she screamed, whipping upright, optics blazing. "In the name of all the goodness our kind has ever held to be true—FOR THE LOVE OF PRIMUS, JUST SAVE HIM!"

Because everything was falling apart. Because Wheeljack was dead. Because Vortex was missing. Because this world was doomed, just like their old one. Because everything—everything was different now.

She loved a Decepticon.

She loved humanity.

She loved this world.

And most of all—

She loved this mech.

"KASSANDRA!" Arcee screamed, looking for the human, spark frantic. "I NEED YOUR HELP!"

Kass was running toward them, her gear bag in hand, but Arcee had turned and was focused on Wildrider again. She knew very little about field repairs. And this... this was beyond any simple patch job.

"He doesn't deserve to die!" Arcee cried, looking back up at Ratchet, willing to beg. "He was saving Danny, saving us, by doing this. You are a medic, sworn to save lives! You must try to help him! You owe him that much! We all do!" Ratchet looked increasingly uncomfortable. Arcee shook her helm, trembling. "Please, I beg you, do not let him die, not here! Not like this!"

"I can't stop the bleeding, I don't have my soldering tools!" Kass was chattering, her gloves on and her hands plunged down into Wildrider's chest, attempting to do something, anything. "Oh, God, oh, God, no, this—"

Arcee spun around completely and grabbed hold of Ratchet's chestplates, shaking him. "PLEASE!"
"I…" Ratchet seemed to struggle with something. Politics. His own prejudice. His medic coding. "Prime…"

She shook her head viciously. "Prime is dead. We must make our own choices now." Arcee stood as tall as she could, though everything in her wanted her to just fall down in despair. She grabbed Ratchet's chassis, refusing to back down. "Will you really let another of our kind fall? One that has given everything to help you? Will you truly make the Autobot symbol one of hypocrisy? !"

They had lost everything in their two-sided war—their home, their past, their future. They only had their own lives now, what was left of their pitiful race. Destroying one another, or letting one mech die because of previous alliances, was more than just shooting themselves in the foot. It was destroying the only thing left of Cybertron—all that was left of themselves.

If they were going to die out, if they were going to fall to Galvatron's reign once again, Arcee would never let her spark go onto the Well of Sparks knowing that her people had done nothing to fix the wrongs of their past. She could not accept death knowing that the mech dying at her feet was left to die in a heap, alone… practically shunned. They all deserved better than that.

"We were once a great race, but this war has turned us all into monsters," she said, trembling. Her spark sang in agony. "Some of us more than others. But this mech—my friend—changed for the better. Earth taught us to love, to feel again—if anyone deserves a second chance, it is him!"

Because… because he had made her laugh. He had made her scream in anger and curse in frustration. He had defended her life as fiercely as any other. Because he had cared about her—because he was her friend. Only now did she realize that sentiment went both ways… and Arcee wasn't going to just stand there and let him die without doing her damn best to make sure he knew that, too.

Ratchet was a stubborn mech. War had nothing to do with it. In the end, thank Primus, it was the medic in him that won, as it always did. He snarled and shoved her away, but he didn't move away from the dying mech in front of them. It was a hopeless cause, but she was grateful he was willing to take it on.

"Fine! Get out of the way!" He spun around and motioned angrily. "Hoist! I'm going to need your help! Kassandra, get ready for several energon line repairs. We need to work fast!"

Arcee willingly fell back, spark aching, as they did what they had to do to save Wildrider's life. She was useless for now.

In the middle of their flurry of movement and planning to use Hoist to drag the unresponsive mech back to the safety of the base, Arcee found herself staring at Wildrider. She wondered if he even knew what was happening. She wondered if he knew she was there.

A keen escaped her vocalizer as she stood there, trembling.

*Primus, don't let him die, too.*

0000

*Plumas NEST Base*

*10:30 AM*

They had planned for Thundercracker to have only a short break between searches; although he
needed to be able to tell the other teams what to expect from the drones, his presence on the search teams was critical. His first search team had found nothing, which was fortunate, because when he'd learned that Wildrider and Danny were missing, Thundercracker had spent barely any time preparing for his own second departure. He didn't really care about being late, however, when there were more important things to be concerned about. The jet wasn't going to leave until he had gotten news about Wildrider and Danny, whose disappearance was now not an annoyance, but rather a large concern.

And where was Rachel? He hadn't seen or heard from her since the first convoy left, but Rachel had said she was going with Jazz's group. She was probably with WJ; she'd spent most of the previous evening with the mech, working out the bugs in her new gear and figuring out how to use it.

To make matters worse, now Jazz wasn't answering his comm. Thundercracker growled lowly as he stalked across the front of the hangars, trying to find his smaller mate. This was ridiculous, this lack of proper communication. And they were trying to be an army? That was a joke—

"Thundercracker!" someone shouted, ripping the jet away from his thoughts. The fear and urgency in the voice was alarming.

Turning, Thundercracker saw a familiar NEST soldier rushing up to him. "Lennox," the jet acknowledged. He motioned with his helm. "I'll get ready to leave once I speak with Jazz—"

Out of breath, Lennox shook his head fiercely as he stumbled to a stop in front of the tall mech. "Don't. Not… not yet." He was agitated as he took in Thundercracker's form, clearly battling himself internally. "Jesus. I…" The human looked afraid. "Have you heard?"

That was probably the worst thing to be asked in a time of war. Thundercracker braced himself. "About…?" he asked, incredibly wary.

"Wildrider was found by Ratchet's team," Lennox said, nervous but trying to be calm enough to deliver the message. "He's alive, but barely. They got him back here—he's in the med-bay. It doesn't look good. I'm sorry."

Instantly, fear flooded Thundercracker's chassis and he almost took off toward the med-bay. Wildrider—was dying? Was that what he was being told?

"…Primus…" The Seeker tried to keep calm, focusing his attention on the Major. "They found the drones…?" Oh, no— "What about Danny? !"

"She's okay. The local hospitals aren't great, so Kane and Bluestreak brought her back here and our medics took a look at her. They said she'll be fine," Lennox replied. He leapt up in alarm when Thundercracker abruptly turned to leave, now determined to find the injured members of his group. "Wait, don't leave just yet!"

Thundercracker turned and glared at the human. The unusually nervous organic was useless to him now. "What? I should go find the others," he said, irritated. He needed to go find Jazz and figure out what they should do next.

The blond soldier seemed to be uncertain how to speak, which immediately alarmed the jet. "…That wasn't…" Lennox tried to say, clearly struggling. He looked like didn't want to say what he had to say next. That made Thundercracker instantly wary. "There's something else…"

Lennox hesitated. Thundercracker waited, despite the nervousness in his spark that urged him to walk away, now, before the human continued. Something told him that this was worse than Wildrider almost dying, Danny being injured. But he stayed and listened.
"It's Rachel," Lennox said, eyes tight.

Two words. That was it. And with them came a thunderous, overwhelming sensation of terror to his spark. Thundercracker stared at the human and fought the urge to run away. He had rarely ever heard someone speak like that to him, but it was never for good.

No.

No.

"...What about her?" he asked, somehow finding the strength to speak.

"The 'copter she was on went down, TC... I'm sorry." Lennox stared at the jet, remorse startlingly present in his eyes. When he spoke, the words were like daggers to Thundercracker's spark. "We lost communication and the GPS was destroyed. The other chopper in the search party saw the wreck and noted the general location, but didn't see what happened and couldn't make a second pass because they were low on fuel. The height they were at... the trees and the... The second wave will make a pass, but if there were drones we won't be able to get a recovery team on the ground for a while... I'm sorry."

Recovery team...

Oh... Primus... no.

Thundercracker stared at the human, unable to shield his expression—his horror—his grief.

Rachel was... dead.

His... and Jazz's sparkling... was dead?

"I'm... sorry," Lennox said quietly, eyes filled with honest sympathy. "I know it doesn't help, but... I'm sorry."

Thundercracker tried to speak, but there was nothing he could say. A hollow, horribly dark feeling crept into his spark and he could only stand there, looking at Lennox. He thought he was going to fall into the Pit right there.

No...

This couldn't be happening. He could rationalize Wheeljack and Wildrider—they had gone out fighting for their friends. Rachel wasn't Wheeljack or Wildrider, though. She was... she was Rachel.

She had been nothing but a pest when he'd first met her. He'd thought it stupid to assume she'd be anything more to him than just the human Jazz adopted—but somewhere, somewhere along the line, he had adopted her, too. She became a part of their family—they became a family. She had mattered.

And now... she was dead.

He felt Jazz rushing up before he saw him. Turning almost out of instinct, Thundercracker saw the saboteur walking briskly toward him. There was only mild panic on his faceplates, no sign of the grief or hysteria that was quickly overtaking Thundercracker's own processors.

"Jazz..." he began, voice failing to be as loud as he tried to make it. He felt like he wasn't really awake, like he was in some kind of human dream, where nothing was real.

Primus, he wished this was just a dream.
"TC, Christ, there you are!" Jazz exclaimed, worried. He stopped just a few feet from him, ignoring Lennox entirely. "Didja hear? Wildrider's in with Ratchet now. He—he wasn't sure if… it don't look too good, TC."

Thundercracker began to shake. "I… know…"

Jazz didn't notice his nervousness at first. "Yeah, well—wait." He paused and looked around on the ground, suddenly alert. "Where's Rachel? Did she leave yet?"

"She… went in ahead," Thundercracker replied, shaking so badly now that he was sure it was visible. "In the first group."

"What?" Jazz exclaimed in surprise. He stared at Thundercracker with growing apprehension. "Wh-what's… where… where are they?"

There was fear—but lots of hope in his optics. Thundercracker wished he were somewhere else, that someone else had to say the words he didn't want to be true. His wish almost came true.

Lennox cleared his throat, making Jazz look at him. "They didn't make it," he said quietly. "Jazz… she was in the lead chopper and it went down. They're pretty sure it was drones."

It didn't take much to utterly destroy that remaining hope.

"…No." Jazz shook his head slowly, visor huge, disbelief, horror… grief, all becoming rapidly apparent in his expression. "No, no, no, no…!"

"I…" Thundercracker began, but failed. His spark flared with his own emotions and he couldn't stop himself from shaking. Reaching, he tried to hold on tightly to Jazz. "Oh, Primus…"

Jazz screamed and ripped away from Thundercracker, who could only watch as the smaller mech wailed and fell to his knees.

"Not Rachel, not her, oh, God, no," he warbled, clutching at his helm. He dropped to the ground completely, a horrible whine rising from the depths of his pitiable form.

Thundercracker knelt beside him, shaking even worse now. He wanted to scream like Jazz had and just let the world know exactly how he felt.

Their family was falling apart.

Wheeljack, Rachel… Wildrider, perhaps, would soon follow. Maybe all of them would. Maybe Rachel had been right, that they couldn't fix this world and they, like all the others trapped on the surface, had no other fate but death.

It just wasn't… fair. After everything, after all their losses, it wasn't fair that they could still have their sparks ripped apart, their emotions torn to pieces—

"Why?" he whispered to no one, bowing over, arms latching onto Jazz, who just wailed in his grief. Thundercracker shut off his optics and shook.

He tried to think back to his youth on Cybertron, but the memories were all distorted. His creators, his friends, his colleagues—all dead. Skywarp, Starscream—dead. Goddard, Wheeljack… Rachel. They were all dead, and Jazz could easily die in the same horrible way. There was nothing to hold onto, not anymore.
Shuddering from the pain in his spark, Thundercracker looked up, past Jazz's heartbroken form, and tried to think of something that could give back some rational hold over his life. They had a fight to continue. The drones… they hadn't won completely. Maybe, maybe there was no hope of victory, but to kneel there… after losing everything…

Rachel would have insisted on fighting it to the end. That much, he was sure of. Thundercracker knew the young woman had been fighting her fears over the last few days, but the last thing she had insisted upon was fighting for their future. If she could do that, and go down fighting, so could he.

"We'll be okay," he whispered, letting Jazz rip into his armor with desperate clawed hands. His keening never ceased and Thundercracker offline his optics.

Whether or not they would be all right would depend entirely on what they did next, if they got themselves together and did what their child had urged them to do. Thundercracker prayed for strength—from a god that seemed to have abandoned them all.

He could not let go of his faith in his mate, his friends, his family any more than he could let go of Jazz now.

They would take the next step when they were ready.

0000

Oregon
Near Mount St. Hilary
10:15

Being on fire was not a fun experience.

Rachel gritted her teeth as she managed to get free of the seatbelt that was holding her partially upside down in the mangled helicopter, managing to drop her feet down before her head. The back of the helicopter was gone, hit by some sort of missile, or perhaps a drone. Fuzzily, she thought that the impact would have thrown her right out of the downed helicopter if she hadn't been wearing that seatbelt. As it was, she'd hit her head on the side of the aircraft and knocked herself out. But from the looks of Ferrell, she figured the seat belt combined with the suit and helmet had saved her life—she was pretty sure she owed WJ some serious gratitude if she got out of this alive.

Even if the suit had taken most of the impact, she hadn't escaped unscathed. Her right hand was burning and not from the flames. Her chest hurt, maybe a broken rib. All that, and the fire too. Her left side had been literally on fire when she woke up (most likely the burning had roused her, she thought belatedly.) Luckily, neither her flight suit nor the armor WJ had fashioned were flammable, and once she'd gotten away from the burning seat she'd managed to beat the flames out with her hand.

The next step was to get out of the flaming aircraft. She had to kick the door open and climb out; the helicopter had rolled onto its side. Rachel didn't want to risk taking the helmet off just yet, but the HUD visor was cracked. They had crashed into a forest pretty high up in the mountains; there was no telling where exactly she was.

"Rachel Cooper to NEST base, come in," she repeated over and over into the mic, but all she heard was static. Either the impact had messed up her radio or she was really out of range. Based on the fact that the HUD was down, along with her GPS and all the onboard navigational aids, she bet it was the impact. Rachel exhaled, trying to remain calm as she stumbled away from the crash.
She didn't want to risk flying. If they had been attacked, she'd be a sitting duck in the air if their enemy (or enemies) were still close by. The idea of running into a swarm of drones alone was not appealing. Also, she wasn't sure the suit could handle flying at the moment.

There was no sign of the other helicopter, so she wasn't likely to be picked up any time soon. She figured the flames would be as much a signal to an enemy as they could be to a friend, so she began to walk. She remembered that almost every valley in their search area had a stream or river running through it that headed towards the base of the mountain, so she headed downhill. She figured all those rivers would eventually lead to roads and civilization, or at least another person.

It was a lonesome forest. Rachel felt oddly not at home while walking through the trees, limping as the pain in her thigh became more pronounced through the movement (and loss of adrenaline). After all the months she'd spent hating her time stuck on the base at Plumas, she would have thought being in the woods again would have been… like going home. But it wasn't. It was just too quiet and too lonely. Even though this Earth should have been teeming with life, she only saw a few birds and never heard anything other than the sound of her feet crushing branches and leaves.

She hoped she'd find civilization soon. It was creepy walking alone in this place while it was still light out. Come nightfall, it would be unbearable. She couldn't stop. There were drones somewhere in those woods. Maybe that's what made it so creepy. Or perhaps it was the fact that she no longer had ten other companions walking with her to make it just a little nicer.

"Jazz's gonna kick my ass," she muttered through clenched teeth, shivering a little in the cold. Better than being on fire though, she told herself; it was much better than being on fire.

It got colder as she trudged along. Part of her visor was getting fogged up, the cold air seeping in through the crack. Rachel shivered, more from fear than the cold, and tried to keep focused on getting through the forest before nightfall. Maybe she should have stayed by the wreckage, or at least brought some of the fire with her…

After nearly forty minutes of walking, Rachel noticed something flashing. She looked around alarmed, but soon realized that it wasn't near her. It was on the HUD screen. At first she wanted to blame WJ for his invention having so many irrelevant options—

But then she noticed what was there. It wasn't Cybertronian glyphs. It was a green circle with a small flashing red blotch on it, though the image kept fading in and out with static on the malfunctioning screen.

…Oh, God. Was that radar? Rachel reached up and tried to steady the fading image, though her hand physically did nothing to help. She could barely make out anything precise on the cracked screen and the green lights weren't very bright. However, the red marker flashing toward the right side of the little map was clear enough to be alarming.

Energon signature. Rachel shuddered and tried to keep from panicking as she realized what the radar was trying to tell her. Something Cybertronian was nearby. If she understood the radar correctly (oh, why hadn't she made Jazz show her one before?)… if she was in the center, and if the red marker was supposed to be the "enemy," … then it wasn't far away.

It was getting closer.

Spinning around, Rachel forced herself not to start breathing heavily. Too late. Her ragged breaths carried over the small clearing between large pines. She couldn't see anything through the dense needles. Just her luck to land somewhere where the trees didn't shed their leaves.
The radar kept beeping, with the red dot apparently getting closer. Rachel didn't have eyesight sensitive enough to tell if it was really close or just a glitch. She turned slowly and watched the red dot move to the front of the green circle. She guessed that was where the source of the energy was originating from.

Nearly a hundred yards away stood a large collection of fallen pines, maybe capsized last winter by snow. Their braces were dead, but even that dead foliage was thick enough to make it nearly impossible to really tell what stood on the other side. She saw nothing at first, but that didn't matter much in the end.

It may have just been her heart, but Rachel thought she heard something past the silence of the forest. It was too quiet. The birds knew the danger far better than humans ever did, Goddard had told her wisely. Always trust them—and never trust their silence.

Rachel felt as though her armor had suddenly taken on three times its weight; moving seemed impossible. Logic told her to keep going, or to run. Her leg was hurting and her ribs were killing her, but the risk was too great.

Instead of rushing away, Rachel edged closer to the debris pile. The radar bleeped louder in her ear, marred by static, and it made her more aware of her harsh breathing. The leaves sounded like glass shattering underfoot as she walked on unsteady legs toward the trees.

Leaning up, Rachel peered through one of the few gaps, praying that her strength wouldn't give up on her now.

There was a flash of silver beyond the browned needle curtain, but in just that one glimpse, she saw too much. There was more than one. That was all she needed to know.

She gasped and flew back away from the fallen trees. She turned to run, forgetting about her injuries, and tried to find something to run toward. There were only trees. She was alone in an endless forest with nowhere to run or hide.

Her heart pounding, Rachel spun around when she was only yards away, suddenly filled with terror.

She had to get out of there. She could fly, or run, or try to hide—

*Tck. Tck tck tck.*

Rachel stared at the overgrowth she had rushed away from with huge eyes, her heart beating so fast, it hurt her chest. She couldn't look away. She couldn't.

Against the backdrop of the silent forest, the sound of metal sliding smoothly against metal, almost like sliding beads, filled the air. It was a prelude of what was to come. She already knew what it was. She had grown up with it as a harsh lullaby, an all-too constant reminder of why she slept with a gun in her hand, or why she had learned that running was her only salvation in Europe's cold, dying grasp.

Cresting the mound, the drone slithered in a perfect arc over the debris, its body no longer obscured from vision. Its single red optic dominated the gray circular body. Rachel's own eyes were dragged to the sides, where its long limbs flowed slowly behind it. It looked like it was swimming in the air, a majestic sight to anyone who didn't know what those serrated legs could do.

The drone never sped up or tried to rush her, but she knew it saw her. She knew it was looking back at her with hunger. It was waiting. Observing. Hunting.

Rachel watched the monster swerve in the air and peer down at her like any other of its prey.
But unlike the majority of its prey, Rachel knew what she was looking back at. She knew it all too well.

Suddenly, she didn't want to flee anymore.

Suddenly, fear was completely and utterly replaced by a much more deadly emotion.

"All I have ever done, from the moment I was born, was run. From you," she said, slowly shaking her head. Everything drew down closer, and closer, until it was just her and that big red eye. "My entire life has been one long race away from you."

Hissing, the drone's movements increased, readying for an attack. Rachel felt something in her mind snap.

"Well, I'm done running, you awful motherfucker," she said, rage overflowing as her voice rose to a shout. "I AM DONE RUNNING——"

The drone shrieked at the same moment Rachel raised her gun and fired. The concussion blaster was even stronger than it had been the last time she had used it, fifty years ahead in a foreign future. The recoil was enough to send her skidding backwards, her armored boots only barely keeping her grounded. The strike had gotten the drone in the face, causing it to careen to the side. Rachel fired again and again, taking off several of its limbs, causing it to lose its magnetic power, and it hit the ground with a mechanical scream.

She could have run. She should have run. She should have taken the chance to flee the moment the drone hit the ground. The chance to run away wouldn't come again, most likely.

But she stayed. Rachel walked over and shot the drone again in the optic, ending its miserable existence, and then turned to face the debris pile, where three others were screeching their way toward her. The air sang with memories of death, and fear, and utter despair—and Rachel raised her weapon again to face them head on.

She was fucking done running.

Rachel couldn't breathe as she fired against the drones. Her aim had never been that good, but she wasn't trying to hit them all at once. She did what Jazz always taught her, in a way a parent taught a child, in a way her mother had never bothered to do and her father never could. She hit the one on the left on its side, sending it spiraling into the other two. Their exteriors were only as durable as their own frames, after all, so the serrated edges of the tentacles were enough to rip into each other. They shrieked and spiraled to the ground, at least two of them did, in a flurry of a self-inflicted violence.

The remaining drone escaped, only tumbling to the side, but it recovered and shot through the air toward her with predatory skill.

Dodging was useless; those legs could reach her easily. Rachel kept firing, moving backwards as quickly as possible to give her more space to bring it down. It had to swerve back and forth to avoid her blaster rays; she had to hand it to WJ for making it more lethal. Concussion blasts would never have lasted her this long.

And then, in the fury of violence, Rachel felt her legs give way and she was tumbling backwards, the last bolt spiraling useless into the sky.

For a moment, she thought she was dead, that she had missed a drone behind her and she was being torn in half. But there was no pain—at least not at first. There was a distinct sense of falling and suddenly, Rachel realized the ground beneath her feet had shifted right over a large incline.
Oh, shit—!

She hit the ground and apparently every damn rock on the mountainside. She lost her sense of what was up; all she saw were trees flying upward as she went down. She slammed into one large rock, the pain enough to make her drop her gun. She tried to grab it, but she was already tumbling through the avalanche of displaced dirt and stone.

Rachel expected to hit the ground hard, but a roaring sound became startlingly noticeable before she reached the bottom of the incline. However, it was only available to her ears for a moment—before she hit not rock or dirt, but water. And she hit hard.

She fell straight through the roaring and chaotic veil of water, slamming into several rocks and hard gravel at the bottom. Her poor suit and burning ribs took a lot of the damage, but Rachel was more concerned with the darkness that took over her line of sight the moment she went under. She couldn't see—she couldn't move—the water—the current was so freaking strong—

Rolling and writhing, Rachel struggled to right herself in the water, to reach the surface. She slammed into another rock and almost went down again, under the weight of her armor.

Briefly, she managed to kick up to light, which she assumed was above the water. Her helmet was keeping the water out somehow, though a severe trickle was letting liquid in from the crack. The light allowed her to see that she was in the middle of what had to be a river. It was all white foam and cresting waves before she was forced back down as the river dragged her mercilessly in its grasp.

After what seemed like hours of battling, the river's current finally stopped yanking her down. Rachel kicked up off a rock and broke the surface again, and this time managed to stay afloat. She saw a streak of brown—sand, dirt, whatever—and in a brief moment of clarity knew she had to get over to it.

The water was fucking freezing. After several minutes of fighting the water and trying to swim with waterlogged, frozen arms, Rachel's feet hit sand. She dragged herself through the shallow water and abruptly found herself looking up at trees and a small beach.

If she were a lesser person, she would have thanked God. Shaking violently, Rachel fell onto the beach and tried to fight vertigo. She tugged the helmet off and she choked up the water from her lungs as more splattered over the cold sand from inside the helmet. She kept coughing, even as she tried to turn and look around her. The drones had to have followed. They never gave up. She had to watch for them—before they caught her unaware like this.

But when she looked up and then behind her, and then out at the river, she saw nothing. Upstream, the curve of the water blocked anything coming her way, but aside from the roar of the water, she heard nothing. After a long tense moment, Rachel was forced to realize she was alone.

They hadn't followed? Rachel took a moment between hacking up water to dwell on that statement. The drones never gave up chasing prey, ever. It wasn't normal. Then again… the water. It was freezing and fast moving. It would have blocked her heat signature. Rachel turned her head warily and stared back at the deceptively calm river.

"Thanks," she said, coughing still. "I guess."

She had no idea where the hell she was, but that was okay. She hadn't known before, but now she was away from the drones and down river like she had planned. Everything hurt, from her head to her freaking toenails, but she was alive.
She was *alive*.

There was no time to relish that fact. Rachel got to her feet and started walking downstream. She had to find shelter, or if she was lucky a settlement. It was probably close to noon now, but daylight did not last long in the cold mountain winter.

The woods were suddenly not just lonesome. They were terrifying. If there were three drones, there would be more. Somewhere. She had traveled an unknown distance from the original crash location, but that didn't mean shit when it came to drones. She had to move, fast, and pray she found someone or something soon.

She walked. And walked. For a long time.

Dusk crept up quietly, promising her pitch-black night if she didn't move faster. Rachel fought the fear; she had to keep moving. Just. Keep. Moving. It was her mantra, even as her limbs continued to shake from cold and pain and exhaustion.

She found a road just as she had started to worry about having to spend the night alone in a forest that may or may not be infested with drones. The road itself was relatively unimportant. What she needed was a car and after following the road downhill for a long while without seeing a sign of a person, Rachel wondered if it was even used. Weren't pre-war cars supposed to be everywhere on the roads?

A far-off rumble alerted her to movement from uphill. It didn't sound like drones; it sounded like mechs. Or rather, it sounded like a transformed one. Or a car. Rachel shivered slightly as she waited for something to appear past the dark tree line, when out of nowhere, light broke through the darkness.

The car was driving at a moderately fast speed, but it was far enough away that its bright headlights hadn't reached her yet. If she stood on the side of the road, they'd never see her. So, bracing against the pain in her chest, Rachel moved forward.

The car was a few hundred yards away when she stumbled out into the middle of the road and was drenched in headlight beams. Either they were going to stop, or she was going to be run over. Normally she would have blown up their fucking car, but she didn't think the suit had enough power for that. Thankfully, the driver was smart and slammed on the brakes when he saw her there. It was just one person in the vehicle, a mountain-ready jeep from what she could make out.

Rachel watched him carefully for a moment before taking hurried, unsteady steps closer to the stopped car. The driver looked alarmed, but in the darkness, he probably couldn't see her very well. When she walked up to the window, she could see he was an older man like Lennox or Epps. He rolled down the glass to speak with her.

"Are you alr—*whoa!*" the man gasped, looking up at her disheveled state, the armor, and sopping mud, with an appropriate amount of shock and uncertainty.

Rachel just leaned a bit closer to the car. "How close are we to the nearest military base?" she asked. Channeling her friendlier father, she grinned tiredly. "I kinda need a lift."

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*End Chapter 36.*
A/Ns:
- "If she were…lesser person" – No offense meant toward believers; Rachel is kind of a jerk about religion, in case you don't remember Fallout/ "Faith."
We (finally) meet some (un)familiar faces, Vortex enacts his plans, and in the middle of a war, some soldiers find a reason to celebrate. :) 

Sorry for the lateness. Thank you for making this presentable, Shantastic!

**NOTICE:** There will be no update next week (we're back to once-a-Wednesday now) because I will be away on vacation (aww yeah). We'll return to a normal updating pace on May 23.

**Warnings:** character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

**Disclaimer:** Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

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**Plumas NEST Compound**  
*California*

**Völlige verwirrung.** Utter chaos.

Words could not describe in any of the languages she knew—and she knew many—the sheer terror that wreaked havoc on her mind and spirit. But there was no time to give any of that emotion attention. Instead, it was work. It was a job.

It was all she could do.

It had taken both Ratchet and Hoist to transport Wildrider back to base. He had lost so much energon, the medic had had to give him a transfusion from his own lines before they'd left the little clearing, as well as some from Arcee a short while later, while they were still on the road. Even with that, he had barely survived the trip. It wasn't a matter of simply reattaching limbs, soldering energon lines or fixing armor, which Kass had foolishly hoped for.

His spark case had been nearly severed in half. Ratchet had used an emergency containment field to hold his spark together during the return to base, and the second they'd gotten him into the med-bay and onto a table he had removed it and started working furiously to rejoin the two halves into a single, functional whole. Mikaela had geared up without hesitation to join Kass in helping in any way she could, but almost as soon as she and Kass had taken their usual place on the table he had shoved them off again. Wildrider's spark was still there, barely, and was emitting a dangerous amount of radiation that, while it would not immediately kill the humans, could damage them or cause damage on the cellular level that would eventually cause problems. It was also damaging Wildrider's internal components, fusing wires and corrupting his systems. Once false move and the spark would be extinguished like a living flame.

They didn't have time for caution, Kass thought. She didn't care about getting burned by the radiation or the energon that pooled from nearly every twisted joint and shredded limb. Ignoring Ratchet's
warning, she climbed up everywhere she saw a leak and patched every line she could reach. Mikaela had hooked up an energon drip and then clambered up to help her, quietly helping to hold the slippery tubes still, thankfully silent unless speaking about the injury itself. Words would do nothing but impede their process.

She didn't pay attention to the passage of time, though she knew it was hours before Mikaela finally dragged her off to get some water. They were both burned all over from energon droplets that had sprayed out during the various repairs. Kass had only stopped long enough to quench the choking thirst she hadn't realized she had and then went immediately back to work on Wildrider's fractured under-armor. It had to be resealed after they fixed the ripped energon lines. Kass had no idea how to properly install new plating, but she did so anyway, using instinct and experience to figure it out. She wouldn't distract Ratchet from the most important task, that of saving Wildrider's spark.

She was again forced to realize time had passed—a lot of time—when Ratchet eventually moved away from Wildrider's motionless frame and didn't come back. Kass turned around when she finally realized he'd disappeared, turning off her welder, and trying to toss her sweat-drenched bangs out of her face, although they were trapped underneath her face shield. When she finally saw him, Ratchet was leaning against the wall with a half-empty cube of energon in his hand, silently watching Wildrider without seeing Kass or Mikaela at all.

"Ratchet?" Kass asked, uneasy. She looked back to Wildrider, who was still offline. There were so many wires going in and out of his chestplates, hooked up to so many various medical scanners and tools that he didn't look… real anymore. He looked more machine than anything alive. Mikaela stood and wrapped an arm around her in a one-armed hug, giving support.

Ratchet sighed quietly. "He'll live," he said. His hands were again hands for the first time since that morning; they had been transformed into various tools for most of the day. "He'll be in emergency stasis until his spark radiation stops leaking through the crack in the shell. I managed to seal the crack, so it will stop within a few hours. It should, anyway."

Kass swallowed hard, her throat parched again. "And if… when it does?" she asked. She knew she sounded horrible.

"He'll recover, granted he sits still for more than five minutes if he ever regains consciousness," Ratchet replied. His optics dimmed into faint lights. "I… did not think I would be able to do this. Until his spark is stabilized, there are no promises."

She couldn't look at him for long. He was covered in energon—Wildrider's blood. She couldn't look at Wildrider either, who was still in pieces.

"Thank you, Ratchet," Kass said, forcing herself to look at Ratchet instead. Her eyes burned, this time not from the heat. "Thank you so much."

Ratchet gave her a sad look. "You did more than your fair share, Kassandra. And you, Mikaela. I'm sorry you had to be there, had to witness this," he said, sounding honestly sympathetic for the first time since she had met him.

Kass's grip on the welder weakened. "No, I'm glad I was," she said. She looked over and stared at Wildrider's blank faceplates, where one optic was still missing. "He needed me to be."

Because… because she had to be there for him. As family. As a friend. He had always been so noisy and sometimes scary, but he was Wildrider. He was supposed to be free-spirited, their unhinged, unrestrained, fearless friend. He'd protected her and made her laugh and…
He was her friend.

They managed to finish repairing his left leg before Ratchet finally kicked them out. He would finish the repairs, which were thankfully easier and less severe than spark injury had been. Following their usual routine by rote, Kass and Mikaela hung up their aprons and exchanged their boots for sneakers. They left their gloves—burnt and melted thanks to the enrgon exposure—and welder masks in their little closet. They would have to do an equipment check soon. As they left the med-bay, Mikaela hugged her and then turned to head to the barracks for a shower and some rest. Kass decided that she didn't want to leave for very long. She'd… get dinner, see her other friends, but she'd be back. She had to come back.

She hadn't heard anything about Danny in the last few hours. The medic on the base had checked her over, and then sent her to the local hospital to have an MRI and a CT scan to make sure he hadn't missed anything critical. Last she'd heard, Bluestreak was keeping tabs on her from the hospital parking lot. Kane, the soldier who'd gone with them, had come out periodically with updates, realizing how hard it must be for Bluestreak to wait by himself. At last report, Danny was much better off than Wildrider was, suffering only a severely sprained wrist, some lacerations that had required stitches, and some really bad bruises.

Kass just wished the city of Quincy was closer so that she could check on her. Barns was beside himself with worry, but he had stayed on base to remain available for the search teams. And honestly, Kass was glad he'd decided on that. She wasn't sure she could handle this on her own with just the mechs.

The mechs…

Walking outside the med-bay, Kass was greeted by a line of organic and inorganic faces. No NEST official, should they have walked by, would dare to complain about them blocking the path. Every eye and optic fell on her when she walked out the door.

Jazz and Thundercracker had been an absolute wreck at first, but when they'd realized that Arcee and Barns had taken up vigil outside the med-bay, they had joined their friends. Kass hadn't seen much of either of them, but now… she wanted to run the other way.

Mechs had only a few avenues to express grief. Jazz and Thundercracker had used every one of those by now. The way the two were entwined, as if terrified of losing the other if their grip slipped, was enough to make Kass's heart break yet again.

"He's stable," she said in lieu of greeting, knowing what her friends wanted to hear. Her whole body trembled and she felt weak enough to need to sit down.

Arcee wilted against the wall. "Thank Primus," she said, emotion ringing in her voice. Barns dropped his head into his hands and Jazz whined.

"I shoulda been here with him," the silver mech said. He offlined his visor, sounding agonized. "Primus…"

"This wasn't your fault," Thundercracker said quietly.

"It was!" Jazz cried, his loudness startling them all. He tried to push away, only able to get a few inches away before his strength failed. He kept shaking his helm. "It all was. I… I… I promised I'd be there for all of you. I was supposed t'be a leader, t' protect you." His vocalizer hissed with static and he started to shake. "I couldn't… I didn't do that."
Barns shook his head, tears running over his face freely. "Jazz, you did," he said, choked.

Jazz couldn't say anything else. He clung to Thundercracker's side and keened. Tears would have been an easier outlet, but the mechs had nothing else. Kass couldn't bear to listen to it. Barns curled up with Arcee and cried. The femme just stared at the med-bay doors with a far-off expression.

It was only them now. Arcee, Jazz, Thundercracker, Kass and Barns. Danny and Bluestreak were miles away, Vortex was missing, and Wildrider lay in a medically induced coma.

Wheeljack, Goddard… Rachel…

Kass took a deep breath and found herself turning away from her friends. She couldn't stay there.

"Kassandra?" Arcee asked, optics wide, the only one who had the strength to notice.

"I… I need some time," Kass said. She didn't try to smile, or promise false things, like that she was okay. "Please."

Arcee nodded and said, "Please rest, Kass."

Kass started to walk. She walked until the sounds of the keening and human sobs disappeared.

Outside the hangar, she found a bench and solitude. She sat down and stared at the ground. Bit by bit, things slowed.

After rushing around in a haze of panic-induced adrenaline, she now was feeling the crash.

Slowly…

Slowly, it all crashed back down to Earth, the free-fall over.

It was all over.

Rachel was dead.

Kass sobbed and gripped her head with both hands, her heart filled with grief.

Did anything ever go right for their hapless group? They were given peace—or what little peace an apocalyptic Europe could give them—and it was ripped away from them at every turn while trying to escape their devastated home. Wheeljack was first. Now Rachel. Wildrider was still far from safety. Everyone was a target for fate's cruel arrow.

It wasn't fair. Kass wept now that she was out of the med-bay and away from the energon soaked floors. She wasn't alone, though. She felt a familiar body come up close to her on the bench, solid arms wrapping around her shoulders in gentle reassurance.

"It'll be okay, Kass," Miles whispered.

She just cried and clung to him.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all.

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Decepticon Shuttle
Siberia
Galvatron was nothing like his previous form. Megatron had been skilled at maintaining order in the ranks, brilliant at leading his troops on the field; he'd never been adept with the details of running an army. He'd delegated those tasks to Starscream, Soundwave and others, commenting frequently that a well-run army capitalized on the strengths of its individuals. Starscream was good at micromanaging supplies, making sure their data logs were updated properly, and ensuring that all the minute details were worked out when preparing for battle. He was also highly skilled at tweaking weapons and tactical plans to maximize their impact on the enemy, frequently pulling a win from a loss through his preparation. After eons of following along behind Megatron and cleaning up his messes, Starscream had expected to have to always be there to keep the Decepticon army organized and operational.

But Galvatron… Galvatron spent every free minute obsessively organizing, planning and updating all of the ship's logs. He had removed Starscream from the role of "manager" and had suddenly become the one to receive constant updates on every aspect of the army's actions and plans. Starscream had thought that this precipitous change in his personality was just a malfunction Galvatron had suffered because of his unexpected—and unnatural—resurrection. Megatron had always been imperious and arrogant, a glitch in his systems could increase those tendencies to turn him into a domineering micromanager. It didn't mean anything except that his leader was interfering with aspects of the army that did not concern his thick bucket head.

That was why Starscream knew that if he was going to get into the data stream and see what Galvatron was working on, he would have to go to the command center when he knew no one but himself would be there. The sudden alarm that had been raised outside the shuttle had cleared most of the hallways, and Galvatron was busy harassing Soundwave again about surveillance and security. Without his symbiotes, Soundwave was limited in his ability to gather information, but Galvatron was less willing to accept that fact and far more impatient than Megatron ever had been. Starscream gladly took the window of opportunity to do a little research.

Starscream felt uneasy walking up to the commander's console, regardless. Ever since he had been rudely introduced to the purple menace after he had clawed himself out of the depths of the ocean crypt the humans had thrown him into, Starscream had felt Galvatron's shadow following him around the ship, always watching. Looking for weaknesses and mistakes. It felt like he had optics everywhere, particularly on Starscream.

There was a breakdown of command as it was. Starscream had been defrocked of almost every power he had held in this army, but it wasn't just him. Soundwave, whom Megatron had never felt a need to physically bully, was also dodging strikes from Galvatron's all-too-ready fists, and all orders now came directly from Galvatron, no other. It was a poor way to run the army; Megatron had known this. That's why he had seen the sense of appointing Starscream and Soundwave to their positions. They weren't the fools Galvatron was treating them as.

Why was Galvatron doing this?

Starscream snarled lowly and had his doubts. If he tried to break into Galvatron's personal logs, he would find worse punishment than just brig time. He did not trust that maniac. He could see something unnatural burning behind the lunatic's optics.

He should have just turned away, but it was more than just curiosity that pinned him where he stood, alone, in that empty hall.

Wicked whispers had been floating through his processors for orns now, all sounding like that insane mech he had been forced to listen to for nearly a joor. It was all crazy. It had to be.

*Why do you think he never included you?*
He found himself standing in front of the console and staring blankly into the dark screen. He let his clawed servos rest on the input panel and watched various cyphers appear.

*Why do you think Galvatron rose at all? Not of his own power. Someone else's. Someone far more diabolical, yes?*

Starscream knew how Megatron—Galvatron—had returned. Soundwave had been the one to organize it, being contacted by another mech who called himself the Fallen. This unknown mech had given them the power to resurrect the fallen Decepticon leader, much to Starscream's disdain. Megatron had only been offline a few planetary cycles. Starscream had not even had the chance to take any real control of their disarrayed army.

But then it all changed. Galvatron rose and Starscream fell under his shadow once again.

But that wasn't it, was it?

*Think*, Starscream. *Why doesn't Galvatron include you in his plans? He's hiding something.*

That was true. Starscream stared at the console and couldn't shake the slight tremor in his spark. Galvatron was even more guarded and suspicious than Megatron had been. The warlord let no one close, not even that monstrous Soundwave. He had left Starscream with almost no power over his Seekers. The few missions had been merely scratches at the Autobot forces. It made no sense.

Clinking against the smooth surface of the input panel, Starscream wondered. He thought traitorous thoughts. He remembered what Vortex had said. All of the things he had said. About his other world. About how it fell to ruin.

He thought about the drones.

*What is he hiding?*

Typing rapidly, Starscream easily overrode the safeguards on the data he was after. Galvatron used fear to control the questions and reduce the likelihood of snooping minds. He had no need for higher level encryptions, which had apparently not been changed since before Starscream had had brief power as leader. Still, Starscream did not link into the system. He didn't trust Galvatron, or Soundwave, not have put something in there to attack any mech trying to find out what the tyrant had hidden away.

It was too easy to break into the communication logs and data transfers Galvatron had accessed through his private console, which was ultimately linked with the ship's main systems. Starscream broke through the meager firewalls and was abruptly given access to everything. It was not what he had expected, nor what he wanted.

They weren't logs made by a commander about their army. They were commands from another source. Galvatron was cataloguing orders. Starscream recognized some, but not all of them, as orders Galvatron that had barked out at all of their soldiers, including Starscream. Many were… new.

*Attack the cities, cause chaos, inspire fear—*

He moved through the data as quickly as he could. He ignored things he already knew. Some of the information… was encrypted.

But among the lines of encrypted orders, he kept seeing certain words repeated. Starscream set a subprocess to breaking that encryption as he continued to read. It didn't take long before the program signaled decryption of some of those words, words that had been repeated time after time after time.
Starscream's optics roved to the bottom of the screen and froze as his decryption program translated a command that had been highlighted as important.

_Do not kill them._

_Them?_ Starscream stopped scrolling.

The Autobots?

That wasn't... he had heard his troops complaining about insane orders such as avoiding causing damage to the Autobot troops they did encounter on missions and Starscream had been more angered by the mere fact that Galvatron was superseding the power of his own second in command than in the stupidity of the order itself.

Now, it did catch his attention.

It didn't make any sense, even now. There were no related orders before or after that could give any sane reason for why they would let their enemies in this Primus-forsaken war live. Starscream could barely believe their warmongering leader would ever consider such a command when he was all too willing to kill some of his own troops for the simplest of mistakes.

...And the fact that this was an order directed at Galvatron...

Who dared to order that monster—and why did the monster obey?

"What are you doing, Starscream?"

If it were possible, every wire in his frame would have fused together. Starscream leaped away from the console without even being able to cancel the data search. He spun and nearly tripped over his own pedes as he stared up into Galvatron's faceplates.

Starscream gaped. He didn't even have the ability to feel his terror properly.

"L-Lord Galvatron," he managed to say. He nearly fell back into the other consoles under the shadow of the larger mech. He tried to move around the main desk, to put as much room between him and the warlord as possible. "I—"

He cut himself off, knowing it was hopeless. Galvatron was smirking and was practically feeding off the terror that Starscream knew he was radiating now.

"Snooping around again, are you?" the Decepticon leader asked, moving in closer, his slow pace more terrifying than any flying fist.

"Merely reassuring myself of your grander plans, my lord," Starscream stammered. He bowed his head, still keeping his optics warily on the larger mech as he tried to skirt around the command console. "H-how foolishly done, though, sire. I have no reason to doubt your genius. I now berate myself for being so weak of spark. I have no doubts now."

Galvatron rested his dark hands on the console with predatory optics kept on the Seeker. "Do you?" he asked, in a falsely calm voice. Starscream knew violence lurked somewhere underneath. He couldn't escape it; the only way out of this was to make it less damaging.

"Y-yes, my lord," Starscream said. His optics went to the door closest to them. It led out to
Galvatron's quarters. The doors that led to the rest of the ship would give him the best opportunity to flee, but Galvatron stood in the way.

Galvatron still had Megatron's habit of dragging things out, only this—this was even worse. The darkness in his optics was so much more terrifying now. Starscream didn't try to hide the tremor in his limbs.

"Tell me, Starscream," Galvatron began, falsely calm. His optics trailed downward to the console screen and seemed disinterested, as if this were a regular conversation. "Just what do you think of those plans?"

"G-genius, of course, my lord," Starscream said. He shuddered when Galvatron pushed past the console. The Seeker didn't dare to move away. He'd learned that was a mistake that only promised a punishment harsher than staying still.

The titan before him took on a mockingly surprised tone. "Why would you ever doubt them, then?" Galvatron asked.

Starscream looked over at the doors again before forcing himself to return his gaze to Galvatron. "I… I assure you, my lord, I do not—," he tried to say. The whole room pressed inward; he immediately felt drowned in claustrophobia.

Galvatron moved even closer, white smile sick. "Why doubt them before, Starscream?" he asked quietly. Starscream shuddered when the titan's face came just barely to a stop before his. When Galvatron spoke, it was worse than being struck. "That you would need to break into my ship's data streams to reassure yourself?"

Mega-vorns ago, before Megatron had disappeared, trapped on this miserable planet, Starscream had been used to arguments that led to violence. It had almost become a routine, to push and challenge his ignorant leader. The punishments weren't always a constant; sometimes it was just words.

But Starscream had always known when the violence was coming. Galvatron didn't just use words. Words were never enough to sate the fire that undoubtedly replaced his spark.

He knew before Galvatron even moved that the talking was over, but Starscream's speed was not enough for Galvatron's mass. The tyrant's fist slammed into Starscream's canopy and sent him reeling backwards, crashing into the command deck. Galvatron fell upon him and his larger hands easily caught Starscream's throat, nearly hurling him into the air. Another solid hand shot into his chest, breaking through the gold canopy glass carelessly.

Starscream felt a flood of terror surge through him as he grappled uselessly at the hands clenched around his chassis, hands that could so easily crush through the metal straight to his spark. Galvatron loomed over him and radiated barely constrained rage.

"You think you can challenge me for your mistakes? ! You claimed to have lost your best soldiers when that damn teleporter and his mate got scrapped. You blame me for your failures—!" Galvatron hissed.

Something dark snapped inside Starscream's processors, resonating with the oddly poignant grief in his spark. "They wouldn't have been lost if you hadn't sent them on an insane mission to bring down Prime!" he shouted back, before he realized his words were condemning daggers directed straight at his own spark. The stolen data all too readily surfaced and he used it foolishly. "We wouldn't be losing so many of my troops if you were sending them to kill the Autobots, not let them live—!"
"Your troops? !" Galvatron roared, sending both over the tipping point.

Starscream screeched when Galvatron crushed into his chestplates. Instinctually, he brought his legs up and kicked as hard as he could, firing his turbines for adding force. It was enough to dislodge the hand on his throat, but Galvatron kept hold of his chassis. Starscream was thrown viciously away from the command deck and he skidded across the floor before slamming hard enough to bend his wing.

Pain flooded his systems and before he even had the chance to think about getting away, Galvatron was already upon him. Starscream tried to duck out of the way and was suddenly screaming in hysterical pain when one of the crushing hands latched onto his injured wing and pulled hard enough to bend it back even further. The pain almost sent him into emergency stasis. He saw a blur of purple—pain—

"STARScream!" There was the distinct sound of a cannon whining. "GET DOWN!"

Starscream couldn't even turn right-side up to kick away from Galvatron, but luckily it didn't matter. Galvatron's roar of pain and rage startled him, but not as much as the sudden absence of the warlord overhead. Starscream managed to shut down his pain receptors in his wings long enough to turn over. He managed to catch Galvatron crashing into the floor only spaces away, his body convulsing. The lights overhead and behind him also began to flash wildly out of control.

Vortex was standing half-way between the doors and where Starscream lay, his forearm transformed into a cannon, glowing brightly from discharge. The helicopter was pointing his weapon directly at the fallen Decepticon leader boldly. Starscream gaped as it became clear Galvatron could not get up, his body unresponsive.

How did… how did Vortex incapacitate Galvatron so easily? It wasn't a plasma cannon, or any sort of ballistic weaponry. It hadn't done anything to Galvatron's frame. It…

Starscream stared in recognition at last. A hypersonic wave distorter? That was used for short-circuiting machines, not mechs. But that—was enough to work. It had to be. Galvatron's insanity had to stem from his unnatural state, a resurrected spark, though Starscream doubted it was a real spark at all. Galvatron's sensor systems were clearly overly-sensitive. A weapon like this could incapacitate him in a way brute force never would.

Vortex kept his weapon trained on the downed Decepticon leader, who was snarling and trying and failing to get up, twitching uncontrollably on the ground.

"Get up and go!" the helicopter shouted, to Starscream. "Now!"

Starscream gaped. "You—!" What the frag was going on—? !

The gun dropped out of sight when Vortex grabbed Starscream by the arm and hurled the larger flier forward, surprisingly causing the jet to stumble. "MOVE!"

There was no argument there. Starscream scrambled to his feet. He tried to think of a way out of this. He had to get off the ship, away from Galvatron's rage. The lunatic would think Starscream had planned this, but even if Vortex hadn't interfered, Starscream was a dead mech walking. He had to get out—

The open doors had beckoned him closer haphazardly, but just as he started to move, Soundwave appeared and quickly headed toward the two mechs still standing. Starscream immediately retreated; there was no way he could take on Soundwave, not like this!
"SOUNDWAVE! GET THEM!" Galvatron bellowed from the ground.

Vortex charged on fearlessly. Soundwave transformed his arm into a powerful looking cannon and Starscream started to turn to duck the incoming attack—

But Vortex didn't seem to have the same idea. He pointed his own gun, not at Soundwave, but at the floor. Specifically, he aimed at a small black box Starscream only then realized was laying there. Soundwave didn't notice—at least not until Vortex fired on the box and it exploded outward with a thunderous force. Instantly, smoke and sparks blocked visuals.

There was a moment Starscream was vaguely certain something was wrong about that. He couldn't figure out what it was, but he knew there was something strange.

It soon ceased to matter. Vortex only stopped long enough to reach back and grab Starscream again and haul him through the smoke. They didn't even brush against Soundwave, though they could hear the screaming rage of Galvatron at the front of the command center. Starscream had enough time to think he saw Soundwave's bulky form stumble in the smoke and then they were out of the room.

"STOP THEM, SOUNDWAVE!" Galvatron's echoing scream reached them. Starscream stumbled in fear; the technopath would be on them in seconds—

"Forget him!" Vortex shouted, ignoring the danger. He was already running full speed, letting Starscream go to catch up on his own. "Just go! Move!"

The corridor was suspiciously empty, but Starscream didn't care. If anyone at all came out in front of them, he'd kill them without hesitation. All that mattered was survival now. He heard Galvatron's roar all the way behind them and knew they only had a very short lead.

All at once, the sheer insanity of the situation sunk in, namely what had just occurred in the command center.

"How did you do that? !" he demanded, more stunned than angry, shooting the rotorcraft beside him a wild look. More importantly, how did Vortex manage to sneak a weapon like that on board. He had been stripped of weapons when he had been detained!

"Do what?" Vortex asked as they ran. He kept up easily with the Seeker.

Starscream resisted the urge to stop to grab the other mech and beat the answer from him. "No one knows how to bring that psychopathic nightmare down!" he exclaimed. Galvatron was built for more than war. He was indestructible. Starscream would know; he had looked for weaknesses many times.

"I learned from an expert," Vortex grunted, refusing to explain further. Starscream snarled, but knew there was no time to drag it out. They had to get off the ship.

"Soundwave will be hunting us down," he said darkly. It was only a matter of time. Soundwave could track them easily, especially on their own ship.

Vortex grunted. "No, he won't. Just move!"

They headed, as expected, directly toward the launch bay. It was the clearest route to the outside. Starscream saw no sense in asking how Vortex intended to escape; for his part, the Seeker would easily outpace the helicopter and any other following mech in his wake. He didn't have to care about what happened to Vortex after that; he only needed to be concerned with himself.

An unsuspecting frontliner, a mere grounder, stepped outside the main bay doors, fortunately seeing
them after they saw him. Vortex opened fire and the grounder went down hard. Starscream was alarmed by the sight of the downed mech's armor; he was already injured. Judging by the sound of plasma cannons firing somewhere in the launch bay itself, the coup was not just being operated by Vortex alone.

"Come on, come on," Vortex hissed, not stopping for Starscream to hurry up, after the Seeker had unintentionally stalled by the doors, now suspicious. "We only have a minute before the whole damn ship's on our afts!"

That was true. Starscream's mind was partially on that fact and it gave him the initiative to follow Vortex through the dark launch bay, which was now deathly quiet; he would have no chance against Galvatron if he ever got caught. But now, more curious, the Aerial Commander had to wonder just how the frag Vortex planned this. Was it the Autobots—? It seemed too implausible—

There was a huge white form at the end of the launching bay, where the doors had been lowered. Starscream raised his null-rays to attack, but Vortex shocked him by waving erratically at the new, massive figure that Starscream recognized as an Autobot. Just fragging perfect.

"GO!" Vortex yelled, running straight at the unidentified Autobot. Starscream had no intention of rushing straight into an Autobot prison after escaping this one, but—

The sound of explosions and weapons' fire not too far away from where they were told the aerial commander to shut his vocalizer and just move as directed.

"Vortex, does he have it?!" the unfamiliar Autobot demanded. Starscream took a moment to look at the new, gigantic mech, but a name escaped him. Almost.

"Yes, so let's move it!" Vortex shouted, dodging past him. He motioned impatiently at Starscream, who edged around the Autobot flier warily. "Go, Starscream!" Vortex snarled, shoving the jet forward. "Where the frag is—? !"

The giant white shuttle shot an incoming Decepticon over both Vortex and Starscream's head. "He'll be there!" he shouted back, letting the other two mechs run past him as he gave them cover. "We have to go first!"

Go—where? Starscream doubted the shuttle could move fast, but his bulk would be a good shield. Starscream looked beyond him and stared at the cold emptiness of the planet beyond them, rushing up to the edge, ready to jump out to transform—

But his companions beat him to that plan. Vortex yanked him away from the ledge and Starscream's angry screech was cut off when both strange mechs crowded his space, the wind from the mountains slamming into his armor.

"Hold on, we're warping out!" the white shuttle said. He held his arms out expectantly.

Starscream flinched. "Teleporter…!" He sputtered. "You're insane, we can't all teleport at the same time!" Even if they did, Soundwave could still follow—!

"Do it, or stay behind to die!" Vortex snarled, interrupting his panic. He latched onto the shuttle's arm, leaving one remaining for Starscream.

Behind them at the shuttle bay interior doors, he heard plasma rifles fire. Starscream knew he had no time. He dove at the two mechs and sank his clawed hands into the teleporter's arm. The shuttle
barely flinched and then—

The world disappeared and then righted itself a moment later. Starscream was used to the jumping thanks to Skywarp, but it never failed to be disorientating. He righted himself instantly upon landing wherever they were. His internal geographic registrar was momentarily offline due to the shifting of time and space.

Starscream was more concerned with who else was around him rather than where. He immediately located the other two mechs, who had also slipped away from each other after they hit the ground. Vortex had actually fallen over, obviously unused to the teleporting. The teleporting shuttle also looked weak as he moved away, hand to his helm.

"Where are we?" Vortex asked, struggling to his feet. Starscream glanced around wildly.

"Northern Italy. It was as far as I could get with three of us," the shuttle replied. He looked drained, clearly from the jump. He suddenly looked beyond Vortex with brighter optics. "Ah, yes. Our fourth."

Starscream braced himself the moment he felt the air dozens of feet away from them shift. Another teleporter?!

He regretted turning around, because the new mech to appear was yet another massive mech. Eons of war taught Starscream to seek out a sigil even before looking for a recognizable face. The Decepticon logo blazed back at him and Starscream almost shouted in alarm.

"Relax, he's friendly," Vortex growled, cutting his hysteria off sharply. Starscream floundered as he tried to take in what was in front of him. His optics trailed off traitorously to the largest mech present.

White-colored and impossibly tall, the shuttle mech towered over them, scouring the area with bright blue optics. Blue. Autobot. It didn't quite fit his gaunt expression, however, once his mask was retracted.

"It is safe here," he stated, more to Vortex and his other Decepticon friend than anyone else. Starscream hated being ignored. The shuttle spoke to the new Decepticon. "You had me worried."

"Situation: contained," the huge Decepticon replied. "Must not remain here for long. Location only temporarily secured."

Part of Starscream's processors skipped. He couldn't believe this was happening.

It could have been the insanity of teleporting out of Galvatron's clutches so spontaneously. Mostly, though, it was because he was more than certain the new hulking Decepticon was none other than Soundwave.

Ignoring Vortex's warning hiss, Starscream stepped closer to his unwanted saviors. "Who the frag are you?" he screeched angrily to the white Autobot. "I demand an explanation!"

A chuckle started him. "You don't recognize me like this, do you, Starscream?" the white mech asked in accented English, turning around completely. He smiled thinly at the irate Seeker. "My, and here I was thinking you haven't changed a bit."

The familiarity was disturbing. "Who—?" Starscream began, but the larger flier cut him off.

"I am Skyfire," he began, looking directly into Starscream's optics, direct and unafraid. He gestured to the other Decepticon commander beside him. "And this is Soundwave."
Tilting his helm slowly, Skyfire ignored Starscream's shock. "And we have come to save you all."

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Plumas NEST Base
10:00 AM

The base was quiet when she got back. Bluestreak had been nearly silent for the whole ride back from Plumas District Hospital. He had made a fuss about her condition, but Danny wasn't going to be allowing any special treatment. She wasn't hurt that badly at all. Not compared to the others. A sprained wrist and some bruises were nothing. Once the doctors had said she was fine, Danny had insisted on leaving—she refused to stay in the hospital a moment longer than necessary.

She was still grateful to be back on familiar ground; once Bluestreak drove over the base limits, they could see a whole wall of familiar faces waiting for them near Hangar B. Danny all but flew out of the Datsun when Bluestreak rolled to a stop, her only thoughts directed toward reaching her friends.

"Danny!" Barns shouted, the first to reach her. He embraced her and nearly lifted her from the ground. He sounded frantic. "Oh, thank God. Oh, Dieu merci! Comment t'es? !"

It took everything she had not to cry right then and there. "Barns!" She clenched her eyes tight and hugged him back until her wrist ached and her bruised chest screamed. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

Everyone—at least, those that could be there—gathered around and Danny reluctantly let go of Barns to look up at the rest of them. They all looked horrible, just like her. Sleepless eyes for the humans, shaken and vacant optics for the mechs…

"Danny… " Kass began, eyes shining. She hugged the shorter woman, mindful of her injuries. "I was so worried about you. You looked… I thought you weren't going to make it."

Judging by how Jazz practically had to restrain himself from picking her up, probably to hug her, and by how Arcee was fidgeting the way Bluestreak was prone to … they all had.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry, guys," Danny said. She looked past Thundercracker, hesitant. "Lieutenant Kane said that Wildrider was okay. Please… is he…?"

She couldn't bear it, not knowing for sure. Wildrider had fought so hard. He had been torn to hell and back before Danny had managed to crawl away from the debris that had thrown her dozens of yards away from the fight. By the time she had gotten back…

It had nearly killed her. She didn't even care about her own injuries. They didn't matter at all. Wildrider… had nearly given everything just to protect her.

"He'll be okay," Kass said in a quaky voice. She rested a hand on Danny's shoulder and tried to smile. "We're okay."

It could have been easy to believe that, if this was just another day after a real problem, like a drone fight. They'd always been freaked out then, but they'd also always said they were okay. "Okay" was the word they used to reassure themselves that their tiny little group was still intact and safe for at least one more day.

Except…

Danny had not believed it when Lieutenant Kane had told her, as gently as he could, about Rachel.
They would not be okay. Because their group was no longer intact.

Her eyes trailed upwards, to the two mechs that deserved the most patience and kindness now. Thundercracker was seated and Jazz was leaning against the Seeker's shoulder now. Both watched Danny without saying much even when she first showed up. She could see grief fresh in their optics, in their faceplates.

Danny bit her lip. "Jazz, TC… I'm…" She took a deep breath and blinked back tears. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"...It's okay," Jazz said. He glanced at his mate before looking back at Danny. Both seemed like they were trying to just focus on her. "I'm… I'm so glad you're okay, Danny. We both are." Jazz opened his mouth, but his vocalizer trailed off into a hiss. "I'm… just…"

He stopped talking entirely. Thundercracker gripped his shoulder and all seven of them fell silent.

A single helicopter was landing on the tarmac, beyond the line of helicopters that had already come back. They were all sore reminders. Danny tried to keep her eyes away from them and ignore the sounds of soldiers shouting.

"What now, guys?" she asked, gazing up around at her friends. No one seemed sure.

"First, we're taking time off. Just us," Jazz said. He cupped Kass closer and patted Arcee on the shoulder, trying to be comforting. Danny never realized how small he looked once he lost his own confidence. "Maybe we can go somewhere else."

"What about working here with the Autobots?" Danny asked, surprised. She was even more surprised when Arcee didn't object; the femme just listened with a dejected expression.

Jazz smiled thinly. "I need a break," he said simply. The way he said it was unnatural for him. He seemed too tense. Too fake with his smile. Too still.

Danny sighed and leaned into Barns' shoulder. He was playing with his grandfather's compass, a nervous twitch that came out whenever he got upset. Kass sat down with Bluestreak and Arcee ended up leaning against a military jeep, her optics far away. In the background, Danny could hear men shouting, but as far as they had to worry about, their world was right there, between them.

"Jazz, they're calling for you," Bluestreak said quietly. He was looking over at the source of the shouting. Danny hadn't even noticed.

Thundercracker snarled. "They can wait," he said, suddenly aggressive. "NEST doesn't need us. We need this time to ourselves."

Danny agreed with him and had turned around to seek out any incoming soldiers coming to demand their attention. They needed time to—to mourn—to celebrate Wildrider—to just…

Be a family.

She had thought about suggesting that they go to the woods, for some silence, but then reminded herself they needed to be nearby for Wildrider. She looked back over at the hangars, wondering if they could just hide out near the med-bay in the meanwhile. Ratchet would understand, she hoped.

The sound of footsteps, running, made her grimace. She turned wearily back to the edge of the row of jeeps and wasn't pleased when she saw Major Lennox rushing up to them.
"Jazz!" the blond soldier exclaimed. He dared to look happy. It made Danny's stomach churn. "All of you, I'm glad you're all together. I gotta get you to see something."

"Will, not now," Jazz said gravely. Arcee frowned deeply and Kass' shoulders went up defensively.

Lennox dared to grin, like a madman. "No, man, you're going to want to see this."

"We don't care," Thundercracker began, a growl in his voice. "Leave us—"

"…TC…?" Bluestreak suddenly interrupted, startling them. He had spoken so quietly, it had been enough to break through the anger and mistrust. Danny found herself gazing up at the gunner, who looked oddly… speechless.

Kass frowned and tried to follow his line of vision like the rest of them immediately did, past Lennox. "Blue, what is it—?"

Her question died about the same moment all of them finally found an answer to it. No one reacted at first. Danny almost didn't see it, focusing at first on Lennox and then the few soldiers trailing behind him, all smiling in the same odd way.

Danny saw it after Jazz did, judging by how the mech had suddenly stood and then frozen. She froze, too. Literally, every muscle in her body stopped working, save her heart, which skipped a beat anyway. She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe.

Standing in the midst of soldiers and covered in mud, metal, and what looked like splashes of blood, Rachel Cooper was no less than a dozen yards away.

Barns dropped his compass straight onto the cement and Danny heard Kass take a deep, scraping breath. Danny thought she was hallucinating, but Rachel didn't fade away. She remained right there. Right there.

"Hey," she said, breathless, bruised, bleeding—alive. Rachel grinned, the gesture somehow both showing off an arrogance inherited from Jazz, and a collective calm only Thundercracker could have had. "Hey, guys."

Danny couldn't stop herself from bursting into tears, but everyone ignored her. They were all focused on Jazz who let out a strangled sound, like metal grinding on metal, and had fallen to his knees as his hydraulics locked up. Thundercracker just stood in a half-upright pose, his face stuck in what had to be the most emotional expression she had ever seen him wear before.

All at once, things just kind of fell into place.

"You're alive," Jazz was half-screaming and half-sobbing in that static-filled way mechs did. "You're alive!" Thundercracker stumbled closer as Rachel moved forward to them both.

"Yeah. Yeah." Rachel smiled more, but she failed to hide her own tears. She didn't pull away when Jazz grabbed her up, both desperate and fearful to touch her. Instead, Rachel clung to his hand, laughing and sobbing. "Sorry. I'm sorry, dad. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Primus, never—oh, oh, Primus." Jazz brought her close in a gentle hug, the only one the mechs could offer the humans. Thundercracker crouched with them, encircling Jazz with his own arms. "Primus!"

It was surreal to see Rachel there again. Danny felt part of her mind remain in a frozen state as she tried to keep up with the flurry of emotions and motions around her. Thundercracker and Jazz were
saying things rapidly to Rachel, who just kept nodding and brushing away tears. Arcee and Bluestreak stood back with mirrored expressions of awe and bewilderment. Danny wasn't sure how to react. She was so happy, it almost felt like terror.

"I can't believe it," she said, crying still. She didn't think she'd ever stop at this rate.

"Me neither," Rachel said, louder, wet laughs punctuating her words. She moved away from Jazz slightly, looking around their circle with bright eyes. "I'm sorry I couldn't get back sooner. I'm so sorry."

Barns had prayed quietly in French before walking over and embracing Rachel fiercely. Rachel hugged back just as strong, both ignoring her dented armor. Danny sobbed quietly and remained where she was; she didn't trust her legs to hold out.

Thank Primus. Thank God.

"How'd you get out of there?" Bluestreak asked, shaking so much he was making rattling noises. He looked like he was trying to contemplate some crazy science fact that Wheeljack had sometimes tossed out there to make them all go nuts trying to figure out. "The crash…! They said…!"

"This suit saved my ass," Rachel said. She threw her head to the side to shake her hair out of her face. She looked liked she had had rocks thrown directly at her face, honestly. "Not to mention the river. Drones didn't keep up and I managed to get away." She smiled, the gesture weak compared to the confidence Rachel generally had. "I'm okay."

"I'm glad," Jazz said, voice fritzing. He and Thundercracker let their hands down on either side of her. "I'm so glad."

Rachel smiled and hugged both hands wordlessly. Danny smiled so much it hurt.

Oh, Wheeljack… you brought her back to us. The suit… it had to have been him.

Danny hugged her friend and reveled in the emotional chaos. Piece by piece, the worst two days of her life were fading.

Wildrider would get better. Rachel was with them, safe. They'd find Vortex soon. They would be together again and safe.

"Thank you," she whispered into the air, knowing someone was listening. She knew Wheeljack was.

It was still slow motion after that. Rachel did her best to assure her friends she was alright, despite her sorry state. While Jazz fussed about her going to see an army medic, Rachel began to recount her harrowing and bizarre escape down a steep cliff-side into a raging river. Danny still found it difficult to believe her blond friend was actually there with them. It was just… mind-blowing.

And then, of course, they weren't alone.

Barns looked behind her abruptly, his eyes narrowing slowly. That prompted her to spin and look for the next big crazy thing to be thrown their way. However, it wasn't too odd a sight. After giving them the space to mourn and then celebrate for that morning, the Autobots had finally decided to move in to talk with the refugee group. Danny had expected it, but perhaps not like this.

It wasn't just Prowl and Ironhide; Sideswipe and Hound also were trailing behind the two commanders, plus Epps, who looked like he was prepared to do some peacekeeping. Danny watched warily as the group of Autobots approached, Prowl leading the pace. He looked to Jazz and
Thundercracker specifically first, probably asking permission, but neither mech told the Autobots to back off. Arcee moved forward a bit in front of Barns and Danny anyway.

And then, Prowl smiled—faintly—at them. Danny slowed to a stop as she turned around to properly face him and the other Autobots. Prowl… never smiled.

What…?

"It's good to see our missing friends have pulled through," he said in lieu of greeting. He nodded at Jazz and Thundercracker, and then Rachel, before the smile faded properly back into his usual blankness. He suddenly drew back into a stiffer pose, hands behind his back. "But I must insist we focus on the more pressing matters now."

"Like?" Arcee asked, frowning. The eight of them present exchanged uncertain looks.

Prowl inclined his helm. "The drones. According to your report, Danny, our suspicions of the drones actively building their numbers instead of arriving en masse have been confirmed," he said, looking directly at Danny. She was surprised at the attention, though he was correct. She had told Lieutenant Kane everything she had seen, so NEST would know about the builder drones. "We have also confirmed Barnaby and WJ's theories that the gamma ray mapping can lead us to their locations. It is time to decide what to do with this information."

"We have got to kill them, that's what," Ironhide said, impatient. Sideswipe rumbled in agreement.

"While they're still grounders?" Lennox asked. He nodded, as did many of the humans. "That makes sense."

"I only saw fliers," Rachel added, shaking her head. She must have been exhausted and hungry, but she seemed intent on standing strong for the large debriefing. She ignored Jazz and Thundercracker's worried glance. "But the weird thing was, they didn't try to follow me after I fell into the river. I think it was the cold that kept them from tracking me, but they didn't really try that hard."

Jazz frowned. "Drones not tryin' fer a kill…" he trailed off. "That ain't right."

"They wanted to stay put," Thundercracker surmised.

Prowl nodded. "That may be because of what Danny and Wildrider witnessed. They stay close to the building site. The theory seems to be correct."

"Until it's time to move on," Epps muttered, grim.

There was a low murmur among their group and the air was suddenly buzzing. Danny did not like the threat of violence, but this was different. They weren't preparing for a drone attack, or a Decepticon invasion.

Their attitudes were… more aggressive. Danny couldn't help but feel a twinge of nervousness in her gut, though when she thought about it, she wasn't entirely sure it was fear. It could have been excitement.

There was something odd about Prowl's posture, too, as he turned away to look out at the airfield. His doorwings were still, but his body language was tense, almost defensive. Like he was avoiding stepping on something underfoot. Danny watched him carefully, intrigued. He knew something they didn't. He was a genius, after all.

Slowly, the Praxian moved, opting to slow down as he turned to face the group again, every eye and
optic on him. Prowl paused before speaking, but when he did, Danny was surprised to hear, just faintly, a tremor of something.

"The drones. They aren't indestructible, nor innumerable," the tactician announced, looking at each member of the circle. His words hung like a cloud overhead. "They have to build themselves."

Rachel frowned darkly as she gazed back up at the mech. "And if you kill the builders…"

"They can't continue to build, since they lack the limbs," Thundercracker said, optics just a little wider.

"And then our problems are solved," Epps added, grinning despite the ill look in his eyes.

A strange silence fell over them and Danny looked at each human and mech present, from the stoic Thundercracker and Prowl to Sideswipe and Rachel, who were practically radiating glee.

"So…" Hound said, the silence thick to break through.

"So," Lennox began, glancing around their mismatched army appraisingly, "our simple two-sided war has become a race to find the drones and kill them." He looked up at Jazz and Prowl, daring to smirk. "And then use that to drag Galvatron and the Fallen from their hiding places and kill them, too."

"I like this plan," Sideswipe said, his smile sick, but shared by many.

Jazz's visor burned bright, matching his grin. "Let's do it."

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End Chapter 37.

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Chapter End Notes

A/Ns:
-"Bucket head" – YEAH I WENT THERE
-For the record, Skyfire has an Australian accent. Starscream doesn't care to know this, however.
-…What, you were expecting someone different to be time traveling super heroes? ;)
More will be explained soon, no worries.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

And we're back (or at least I am, from vacation)! Today we get some long awaited answers and a solution for an end is formulated. Keep in mind, we still have another eleven chapters to go. ;) Thank you, Shantastic!

Shameless promotion: I made a huge and colorful poster for Fallout. It's available on my livejournal account (nan00kwr1tes) or my deviantart account directly (beccawashburn), so go check it out!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Northern Italy

The wilderness of Earth could only grant them a temporary respite from Galvatron's search. They could not afford to stay put for long, even with support from the unexpected member of their company. Soundwave was supposed to be hunting them down, apparently, despite actually being in complicity with the criminals in question.

Even still, while Vortex and Skyfire immediately refocused their attention away from Starscream (how dare they ignore him!), Starscream himself could not help but place most of his energy into trying to understand what was going on, rather than on running as far and as fast as possible.

"Skyfire?" Starscream exclaimed, gazing up at the huge shuttle in astonishment.

Wasn't he supposed to be dead?

"You weren't always this slow, Starscream," the other scientist accused, suddenly irritated. Something seemed off about that. Since when did Skyfire get irritated?

And… wasn't he dead? !

"How are you alive?" he demanded shrilly. He stepped closer to the larger shuttle, poking up accusingly at his chestplates. Skyfire rumbled, but did nothing. "I saw the casualty list from Morna-12 myself! Your shuttle exploded!"

"A calculated gesture on my part, I assure you," Skyfire replied, seeming impatient with his questions. But Skyfire had always been patient, overly so! The shuttle attempted to move past Starscream again. "Vortex! Is that bank secure?"

Vortex was at the edge of the ravine they had landed next to, peering far into the distance. "Yes."

Starscream refused to be ignored, not when everything was so out of control. "Wait—you made it look like you died?" he asked, processors overheating. He couldn't shake the startling image of his
old research partner from his optics. "What the frag for? !"

Without prompt, Skyfire whirled around and loomed over Starscream in a way not many other mechs could. The softness that had once defined the shuttle was gone—Starscream had no idea where it could have gone in such a short period of time. Skyfire's alien blue optics, which had been orange when they lived on Vos, were practically smoldering.

"Because, Starscream, unlike some mechs, I joined the Decepticon army under the disillusionment that we were fighting for a good cause—I never signed up to massacre the innocent or exterminate sentient life in this entire sector of the galaxy!" Skyfire snapped. He smiled thinly and shook his helm disparagingly at the Decepticon aerial commander. "Honestly. Do you really think I could stay in such an army? The Autobots were far more accommodating."

With such a simple reply—Starscream understood. And grew angry.

"You're a deserter!" Starscream exclaimed. "You're a traitor!" Leaving the Decepticons for the Autobots? ! He knew Skyfire was a coward, a weakling, but he had never thought he had the backbone for treason!

Skyfire glared. "And also your savior," he said. He nodded back over to the single most frightening figure among them. "One of them. You know my friend here, yes?"

"That's Soundwave!" Starscream hissed. He edged away when Soundwave turned his vacant gaze toward him. "He's working with Galvatron, you idiots!" It didn't matter if he had somehow known of Skyfire's plans to rescue both Vortex and Starscream; Soundwave could not be a traitor, not by any means. It was impossible to even consider it.

Tilting his helm, Skyfire smirked. "Starscream, you are forever the pessimist," he said. The words were harsh, but he spoke gently.

Soundwave rumbled lowly. "Galvatron: foolish," he stated bluntly. Although the blank-faced mech generally expressed no emotion, he was clearly edgy and irritable. He tensely pointed east, back toward the location of the Decepticon shuttle, thousands of miles away. "Soundwave: not this Soundwave. Origin: future."

It took Starscream a moment. He glanced to the side at the helicopter next to him and then over at Skyfire. Suddenly… it made sense. In a crazy, impossible sort of way.

"…You're from the same time as Vortex, then?" he asked. That meant there were two Soundwaves. Just fragging great. That also likely meant that Skyfire… was not the Skyfire of this world. It also meant that the insane time-travel story Vortex had told him was true.

This… was getting out of hand, rapidly.

"Affirmative," Soundwave said with a slight nod. "This Soundwave: present within Galvatron's entourage since August 23, 2009."

Starscream's optics narrowed. "…After we were ordered to raise Megatron."

The Soundwave that had been acting as the third-in-command hadn't been the real Soundwave? It had been the one from the future? How had no one noticed? !

Then again, it was, had always been, Soundwave's job to detect traitors and identify spies and subversives within the ranks of the Decepticons. Replacing him with his analogue was almost perfect, allowing him to redirect attention away from his activities as the mole. Galvatron, who had
been created with Megatron's preconceptions of who exactly he could trust and how much, had probably never doubted Soundwave's undying loyalty.

"Yes. To our regret," Skyfire said, grim. "By the time we managed to corner and successfully offline the Soundwave from this world, it was too late to prevent Galvatron's creation, stop the destruction of the Shard, or prevent the murder of the Prime. We acted far too late."

Starscream tried to keep up. "But... no. There's not two of you then," he said, alarmed. "What happened to the first Soundwave?" The one that blew up the Shard, a directive that Starscream had thought should demonstrate that trusting that Fallen creature was foolish?


"I must apologize, Starscream," Skyfire added. "We used you to obtain access to files that Galvatron had secured even from Soundwave. You did very well, even without any further information than what Vortex gave you."

Vortex had given him nothing—only harsh, traitorous words that had driven Starscream to the insane idea that he needed to know more, that he should find the truth for himself. Anger bloomed in Starscream's spark once he realized he had been duped.

"If you replaced this world's Soundwave deca-cycles ago, why didn't you just steal the data yourself?" the Seeker demanded. His question was directed at Soundwave, but he glared at all three of the mechs staring him down, livid enough to lash out at them if they dared to deny any of this. "Why send me in to do your dirty work!?"

Even if he had wanted to be part of some plot to undermine Galvatron's power, he never would have considered it, knowing Galvatron saw him as the prime suspect for anytraitorous act that occurred. Starscream would have been targeted immediately, even if he hadn't done anything, but the fact that he had would be easily and painfully revealed. He couldn't return to the Decepticons after this—why would these idiots think he would be able to do this!?!

Skyfire expelled air from his vents softly. "Soundwave has more of a purpose here than merely to spy. Galvatron is paranoid, as you have learned. One false move, and Soundwave's position would have been exposed," he said without mirroring Starscream's drama. "We need Soundwave to remain close to Galvatron for future intelligence gathering."

"So you used me instead," Starscream sneered. How dare they—!?!

"And saved your life, regardless," Skyfire said shortly, optics narrowing again. He pushed Starscream with his servo, mirroring the gesture the Seeker had given to him earlier. "You would have gotten suspicious and the same thing would have happened anyway, only you would have faced Galvatron alone, without Vortex to help you. That is how you offline in our world, so it is only logical that it would have happened in a similar way here."

The angry reply he wanted to let loose died before he could voice it. Even if this entire mess could have been avoided... he knew Skyfire, just like Skyfire knew him. In fact, Skyfire knew him better than anyone else left alive, possibly better than his trine or even Megatron had.

Starscream would never admit it though. He ignored Vortex's glare. "Why did you come here?" he asked, glaring at the two giants in an attempt to deflect attention.

"Both Soundwave and myself are from the year 2032," Skyfire replied. He exchanged glances with
his partner briefly. "We came in hopes of fixing the events of Mission City in 2007, but we
unfortunately landed in 2008. Vortex is from 2054. He and his companions found our laboratory and
came here by chance."

That almost made Starscream laugh. "I never would have suspected you working with a Decepticon,
Skyfire, if you deserted for inane sentimentalities!" he said, knowing he was goading a much larger
opponent. If Skyfire had suddenly found the strength to incite rebellion, perhaps he had finally found
the courage for violence as well.

Skyfire didn't react much, but Soundwave rumbled darkly, which caused Starscream to hesitate.
Vortex moved away, clearly disinterested in their bickering.

"The time for factions is over, Starscream," Skyfire replied shortly, ignoring everyone except the
Seeker. "We must find a way to stop our species' destruction at the hands of Galvatron and the
Fallen. Decepticon and Autobot scientists joined together to try to find a way to save ourselves. We
must not fail, and you, Starscream, must help us."

"And how would I do that?" Starscream asked with another sneer. The mere idea was insulting as
well as ridiculous.

Skyfire crossed his arms, a gesture that must have come from the organics that lived on this planet.
"You have read Galvatron's files on the drones. Soundwave and I need to know what has changed
here," he said. "Something is different about this world, the events that have transpired—we need to
know everything, Starscream. We need to save Earth in order to save our own species. It's… it's too
late to change what has happened to Optimus Prime, or the fact that Megatron has risen."

Vortex stepped forward, glaring. "You saw what happens to those who know too much," he said.
He ignored Starscream's angry snarl over being set-up. "I told you the truth, Starscream, to show you
what happens when Galvatron becomes paranoid. That is exactly what happened before. The
Starscream in our time was foolish enough to challenge Galvatron head-on. He was slagged, and
then Galvatron turned on everyone else. Only a very few of us escaped."

"What makes you think I would want to team up with you fools?" Starscream demanded. He
laughed sharply. "I have my army—"

"Galvatron's army," Vortex corrected him, glaring. "After today, they will only see you as a traitor."

"Ha!"

"You doubt me?" the helicopter continued. He dared to move even closer, forcing the Seeker to back
up and feel even more trapped. "Even if you scrounge up an army, you will still be killed. Galvatron
killed everyone. He had the drones."

Ah, yes, those. Starscream flashed through the intelligence he had gathered, those highlighted words
popping up everywhere in more recent entries. "The drones… are not operative yet," he said stiffly.

That much was true, although he didn't know much else about them. He had archived everything he
had seen because there had been too much to try to decrypt while at the console. He had the intel, but
it would take a long time to go through it all.

"Yet," Skyfire said grimly. He peered at the Seeker. "...You know where they are, don't you?
Soundwave's locations have not matched up accurately in this world. We can't find them all without
that data."

"I haven't decrypted all of it yet, so I have no idea what I know," Starscream snapped. "Besides,
Galvatron will change the locations now that he thinks I am working with you idiots."

"Paranoid he may be, but we still have to take this chance, Starscream!" Skyfire exclaimed, suddenly incensed. He gestured sharply with his hand. "If we move quickly enough, we can do it!"

"Addition: method of killing needed still," Soundwave added. That wasn't a good sign, if Soundwave didn't know how to destroy the drones, even after so much time spent fighting them. The only thing that held any promise was the fact that Galvatron seemed to write everything down. Maybe what they needed was in the files.

"We've never been able to figure out how to kill them en-masse. Galvatron kept that secret in our time," Skyfire added. His optics returned to Starscream. There was a faint hope glimmering in the back of them, rivaling the desperation. "You do, don't you?"

Starscream moved away a little. With all the optics on him, he felt claustrophobic again. "Why would you suggest that?" he asked, now quickly trying to sort through the files. It would take far too much time to analyze here, even if the decryption program he had started earlier had finished—and it was still running.

"After I told you about my origins," Vortex began, "you got suspicious. You hacked into the data. That was what made Galvatron attack you today. What did you find, Starscream?"

Even if he didn't have actual answers, the downloaded intel packets were apparently valuable to these mechs. Starscream glanced between the three of them and knew that if he refused outright to share what he had, Soundwave would just take it. Judging by the intense stare the technopath was sending him (and Skyfire, as if waiting for a command), Soundwave wanted to cut to the chase and hack him.

But luckily, Skyfire was apparently still weak. The Autobots had turned his compliance into mercy. Normally, Starscream would mock that. Later he would, but for now it was a gift he would not ignore.

"…What will you give me?" he asked at length. None of the three changed their expressions; they knew him too well, it seemed.

"Amnesty," Vortex said automatically. "I can persuade the Autobots to give you asylum."

That was—ridiculous! Starscream fought down a boiling anger born from the indecent idea of him handing himself over to the Autobots as some sort of lost sparkling! Still, it wasn't defection. It was using the Autobots to keep himself safe, to make sure Galvatron couldn't kill him. Maybe in time, he could escape from this awful world and regroup with more loyal forces elsewhere. Surely when Galvatron's madness grew, as these time travelers promised it would, the Decepticons would see the benefit in choosing Starscream as their leader once more.

"You? What would make them trust you?" Starscream asked instead, focusing on Vortex. Hadn't Vortex said he hated the Autobots he had come with? Then again, that whole speech to Galvatron had been an act, clearly.

Vortex visibly hesitated. "I… I have friends," he said, faltering over the word. "They will believe me."

"You hope," Starscream sneered. One look at Soundwave or himself, and the Autobots would be on them with cannons firing. It could be suicide to approach them.

"Starscream, we cannot defeat Galvatron without the assistance of the Autobots," Skyfire replied,
interrupting them sharply. The shuttle looked exhausted. "I myself was one once, so I can add my testimony. In addition to our time-traveling background, I think our story will be credible. We only need the information you carry."

*Was one once?* Starscream stared at his old partner and tried to dissect those words. What did Skyfire consider himself to be now? Neutral? And yet he fought for this world, for the majority. He had never been a particularly strong Decepticon, considered cannon fodder by many among the senior leadership. He had offline early in the war, and the news had given Starscream a brief moment of remorse. Encouraging him to enlist at the start of the war had been a mistake. But he'd moved on quickly, knowing that guilt and regret were useless emotions.

"Ha… I can still go back. I can take control," he said, trying to push for anything but this. Even if his trine was gone, he was still aerial commander. He could do better than to grovel at the Autobots' pedes for mercy.

"Starscream, you can still be someone worthwhile," Skyfire insisted. He became more desperate. "You can still choose to make a difference. If you challenge Galvatron without backup, you will die and Earth will die in turn. We all will die." The shuttle drew back a little as he held Starscream's gaze. "Please. As your friend, no matter how long ago that was… I need your help."

Making a difference? Friend? None of those things mattered to him. Not now. Starscream had risen as far as he could and relished his power. But Galvatron…

No matter who else deserved to win the war, Galvatron and his insane power-mongering did not. Once he was gone, maybe things could go back to normal, where it was Autobot versus Decepticon, not fighting monsters out to kill them all.

"You're serious about this," he said, glaring up at the shuttle, openly distrustful.

Skyfire met his gaze, and for a moment, it was like time had never changed. They could have been back on Cybertron, back on Vos, before the war. Starscream remembered how honest Skyfire had always been. Now, he could still see that honesty.

"Yes," Skyfire said, optics shining.

Starscream held his gaze for a long moment. A thousand different possible outcomes flashed through his mind as he weighed the odds, like he always did when facing challenges during this war.

Only one option held any promise of true success, at least, for now.

Glancing between Vortex, Soundwave and Skyfire, the Seeker tilted his helm.

"Take me to your leaders, then."

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*Plumas NEST Base*

*California*

Wildrider made it through the night. Ratchet had alarmed them by asking Kass and Mikaela to come back with Hoist to do some additional work on Wildrider late in the evening, and the remaining seven had assembled in the hallway again. Even after Ratchet finally shooed them away, they kept watch close by, questioning Mikaela and Hoist closely when they finally emerged. When Kass and
Ratchet reappeared, everyone stood up, Danny the fastest. She scoured the medics' faces for any signs of positive or negative reactions. She had hoped the silence meant Wildrider was just continuing to improve—

Kass spoke up first. "He'll be all right," she said, smiling through her exhaustion. "He’s in stasis now, but his spark has passed the critical stage. He'll wake up in a few days maybe."

"Thank Primus," Bluestreak said, looking utterly relieved. Danny closed her eyes and mirrored that sentiment in her heart.

"Good work, Kass," Jazz said, the others echoing him. He nodded over at the yellow medic behind her. "Thank you, Ratchet."

"Just remind him not to throw himself at any other drone hives, please," Ratchet groused. Danny laughed, knowing even Wildrider would learn from this. He wouldn't regret what he did though, because he had ended up protecting Danny too. To him, any sort of injury to protect the others he cared for was worth it.

The entire base had reason to celebrate, not just their family. She had no idea how things had changed so quickly. A week ago they'd had no idea where to look for the drones or what to do when they found them. Now, they had a plan to save the world. Once they destroyed all the drones, they could focus on Galvatron, and he wouldn't have his death machines to help him. He'd only have mechs, and mechs were a whole lot easier to eliminate than the drones were, Jazz said; mechs couldn't build each other like an assembly line.

For the first time in her life, Danny realized, they had a plan to win—not just to survive.

It was enough to make her light-headed. She avoided the more populated areas of the base when she wasn't trying to keep vigil with the others near the med-bay. They'd agreed to take shifts now, and she was grateful to be told to rest. This had been two of the most stressful days in her entire life… but the consequences were turning out to be worth every struggle.

She found Barns sitting on the ground at their little camp, using some of their blankets for padding. He had left a little earlier than she had, needing to talk with WJ and Lennox. He was engrossed in his data now, hunched over his newly assigned laptop, not noticing Danny as she walked up.

"Hey, you," she said in greeting. Barns looked up immediately and smiled at her as he stood. He looked just as tired as Danny felt.

They didn't say much at first. They had been quiet around each other ever since her return yesterday afternoon. Barns embraced her tightly now and Danny knew something was wrong when she felt a shudder in his arms.

"Danny…” he said, shocking her. He hugged her once more before drawing back so she could see his grief-worn face. "Forgive me."

Danny couldn't help but stare blankly. "For what?” she asked, startled.

"I should have gone with you to the hospital," Barns said. He reminded her of Bluestreak, with how fast he spoke. He seemed nervous. "We had six teams still out searching, and when they finally reported in I asked Lennox if someone could drive me, but so many people were off the base coordinating the searches so I had to rely on the mechs for a ride, but I couldn't drag them away from Wildrider—"

"Barns!" Danny exclaimed, trying to get him to calm down. She smiled in reassurance. "Relax. I
understand. I'm glad you didn't go to the hospital." Her smile faded a little when she realized why. "I... I'm glad you were here. For 'Rider."

Without her or Wheeljack, Wildrider would probably have wanted Barns to be there when he woke up. Arcee, definitely, but Wildrider had always had a fondness for the humans, particularly Barns and Danny. If any of them were to stay with him, Danny was just happy someone other than herself could give him comfort.

Barns still looked upset, his eyes shining. "I thought..." he began, "when I heard that you had gone out and then that Ratchet's group had found the two of you..." He swallowed hard. "I have never been more afraid. Even when the medic here said you were okay... when he sent you for those scans I was still terrified."

Something twisted in her gut. Danny found herself trapped under his gaze before finally snapping out of it.

"We're okay." She touched his face with her good hand, the other wrapped up to help her wrist. She smiled and laughed faintly. "Especially me."

Barns finally smiled and looked a little better. He sat back down on his impromptu seat and motioned for her to join him. Danny tucked her legs under her and watched him. He put his laptop aside and she hoped that meant he wanted to cuddle. She'd missed him a lot over the past few weeks, and after the emotional low of terror and grief that had been followed so quickly by the elation of success and hope, she wanted the connection with him. She felt that spending time with him would be the best way to cap off this period of her life, a pleasing way to remember it.

"Danny?" he asked suddenly.

She looked over at him. "Yeah?"

"I love you," he said. He looked nervous and decided to use her surprised silence to continue speaking. "I don't think I've been saying that enough."

Of all of the things to hear now. "No, you haven't." She grinned and touched her forehead to his. "But that's okay. Neither have I."

Barns stared at her once she moved away. He looked like he was trying to understand a math problem he couldn't get right away.

"You have never asked me why I never said it before," he began. "I'm surprised you haven't asked me, 'why now.' You've expressed your affections to me frequently, and yet I have never responded."

It had always confused her, and frequently frustrated her. Danny remembered constantly asking nearly everyone else in their group (even Thundercracker one time, whose silence had been the biggest hint to her that he didn't know or care) about what she was doing wrong, why she couldn't seem to get Barns' attention.

"I've asked everyone else, believe me," Danny admitted wryly. "Wheeljack and Kass always said you were shy. I don't think so. You're braver than that. Why, then?"

"I thought..." he began, struggling a little. Considering how calm he was in every other aspect of his life, this was a new side to him for sure. "We would die there. I was foolish enough to believe that... no matter what I felt toward you, what Jazz felt toward Thundercracker, or what Vortex and Rachel had..." He met her gaze and she could see the despair hiding far back in his brown eyes. "It wouldn't matter. We would die soon enough that, even if we had gotten married one day, the next, we both..."
Danny nodded slowly, understanding. They didn't have the luxuries afforded to the people who lived in this time, where they currently were. Sam and Mikaela could enjoy young love and dream of a married life in a way Danny knew she and her other friends could never have even considered back in their old world. There, every day had been a mystery—because each and every day any one of them could have died. Love had kept them together, but they could never, any of them, be truly together. Love had been a liability.

Still, in her heart of hearts, Danny had always wished, like she was sure the others had too, that tomorrow would wait just a few moments longer to arrive… just so that she could afford to love someone as deeply as she wanted to.

"I was a fool to think that. A coward," Barns said finally. He looked down at his folded hands and looked sheepish. "I have wasted many years."

"No." Danny reached out and grabbed his hand with her un-bandaged one in order to link her fingers through his, squeezing in support. "We've got a lot more now, so we can make up for them."

Barns laughed and nodded. He moved back so that they could both rest against the crate, bringing their blankets with them to sit on instead of the cement. Danny watched him watching her and everything felt right again.

"What made you fall in love with me?" she asked. Years ago, she would have been too shy to ask that, but Wheeljack had taught her to always keep asking questions until she understood things, even if it took a long time to get a grasp on a concept. She was still learning to understand Barns.

"Your smile," he said. He gave a smile of his own, beaming back at her. "You never gave up. You held me through Goddard's death. You kept us all afloat so many different times. You were strong and kind, and you never gave up." He chuckled and shrugged. "Not even on me."

Danny blushed; she was glad her skin was darker than her friends', since it hid the gesture better. She had always dreamed of this moment. She knew Barns liked her. She had just never known how much, or why.

"You told me you loved me because you think we have a chance now?" she asked, curious.

"I have no idea how many chances we have. But I don't care," Barns said. His sudden firmness surprised her. Barns nodded at some internal decision he had made. "I'm no longer counting days down. I am counting them up, counting how many days we are still together. They are an accomplishment now, not a sentence."

Smiling, Danny gently tapped his nose and let her head rest against his shoulder. "There's the genius I fell for," she said fondly. Barns chuckled softly.

Watching the base from the camp, content and warm, Danny knew they could have sat there all day. Even if things for them became more involved over time, some things didn't change. They could still be friends, enjoying each other's company in silence. Danny smiled to herself.

"You fell in love with me because I was smart?" Barns suddenly asked, breaking the quiet.

"No, I liked your nose," Danny replied without a second thought. His voice was a bonus, too.

Barns turned his head slowly and arched an eyebrow at her. Danny grinned shamelessly.
Both broke down into laughter and fell back onto the blankets, their mirth brightening the once dark room.

The base was quiet, despite the almost constant movement of soldiers. Now that they had evidence that WJ and Barns' theory was correct, Keller was organizing a massive world search via other governments. They were identifying the drone locations so that they could attack in sync, all at once. There was a concern that the drones might have some sort of contingency plan, so a coordinated effort gave them more of a chance to hack away at their numbers. It was a good plan, even if the idea of any of their friends leaving base again made Bluestreak incredibly nervous.

He tried his best to stay out of the way. Now that Wildrider was better (thank you, Primus!), it was less urgent for all of them to stand watch. That left the sniper feeling a little dazed. Sitting around doing nothing seemed out of the question, after so many long hours of waiting tensely.

On the other hand, he didn't want to ask NEST or the rest of the Autobots if they needed help with anything; he was mildly afraid they'd send him off base or away from his friends, which just wouldn't do. Thankfully, the Autobots had patiently given them space and time to collect themselves. Bluestreak had to remember to thank Prowl sincerely; that mech was going above and beyond in the way he looked out for them.

He knew he wasn't the only one in the group to feel like he was waiting around awkwardly. Rachel was, naturally, spending most of her time with Jazz and Thundercracker. Months of acrimony had been surmounted by the emotional upheaval of Rachel's near-loss. The three of them had catching up to do.

Arcee had chosen, oddly enough, to spend most of her time on watch duty for Wildrider, which Bluestreak couldn't quite understand. Sure, it was natural for her to worry, but the serious dedication to remaining near the med-bay wasn't like her. Barns had muttered something about how she had been affected strongly by Wildrider's near death, so maybe that was it.

Bluestreak thought about seeking out Barns and Danny, but… he still had to work through some issues of his own, specifically with what had happened to Danny.

When he and Kane had desperately raced Danny back to the base, Bluestreak had been absolutely frantic. Even though his scans had not indicated any serious loss of function for heart or lungs, he had feared that she could still be dying. Dying. He had been so grateful when the medic had told him she'd be okay, and again when Lieutenant Kane had told him the hospital scans confirmed it. He knew from that moment on, it could only get better.

Except… it wasn't going to be something he would forget. Ever.

Danny had been bleeding from a leg injury. Some of her blood had soaked into Bluestreak's passenger seat. Stained. Her blood was stained into him.

Bluestreak shuddered violently and tried to purge the image from his processors. He could get the stains out later, but they'd stay there in his mind, for a long time.

He thought, then, about seeing Ratchet, or maybe WJ, to see what the options were when it came to cosmetic things. He knew Ratchet would just get angry if he asked. Maybe asking the human soldiers would be better…

He could have just gone to Kass, but something stopped him. It had stopped him earlier from seeking
her out too, even before thinking about getting a wash. Although "it" was not an it—"it" was a human by the name of Miles Lancaster.

The whole interaction had been a painful thing to watch happen. He had thought that Kass was against getting to know others outside their group. Strangers back in their old world frequently were dangerous. Here, maybe not, but still… they were a unit of ten. They had to stick together. Outsiders could be friendly, but they were still outsiders.

Except Kass didn't want that anymore. She had reassured him over and over that it was normal, that she wasn't replacing their family. She just wanted to be friends with Miles, Sam, and Mikaela. They were decent people who had helped all of their human friends this entire time.

Bluestreak wanted to agree. He did. Kass seemed happier than she had when they first came here, happier even than after she first started to really hang around Mikaela and her boyfriend. And then Miles… or rather, Miles had come first. He had been the one to really bridge the gap, and through Kass he had reached out to the other three humans too. Even Rachel had warmed up to him, especially after they had realized they were related.

The first instinct Bluestreak had was to hate him. Miles didn't understand, like any other being in this odd new world, how their group was formatted. Their unity had given them the chance to survive. Cracks in their metaphorical armor (he was pretty certain he had used that phrase right) had been dangerous.

But…

It wasn't the same here, was it? Kass claimed it was a good thing, to move on. Bluestreak tried hard to believe that, to understand it. It was nice to not have to worry so much about what was to happen next. Until recently, their group had fared well here.

Standing inside the hangar, Bluestreak watched from a distance as Kass talked calmly with her three new outside friends. She seemed happy. She was trying to bring that happiness inside, to their family, who deserved to be happy after all of their struggles.

Some days, it was just too much. Bluestreak chided himself for his weakness, but on his darker days, he remembered what it had been like to be imprisoned in a cave in the mountains, spending decades alone in the darkness before Kass' camp had found him. He remembered the absolute silence that had nearly driven him crazy. Maybe it had. Trying to imagine his friends now slipping away from him, even just a little bit, made him think back to the dark, eternal nights trapped under stone.

"But this isn't you losing people. This is gaining new friends."

He held onto that. It grounded him better now. He believed it, because Kass would always be there to help him, and he would be there to help her.

Except… they had lost people, hadn't they? Where was Vortex? Bluestreak whined softly in despair. The idea that Vortex just needed to put space between them temporarily faded every day he continued to be missing. What if he had run into Decepticons? Or the drones, like Wildrider and Danny had?

Or… what if he wasn't coming back? It seemed crazy to think that, but… the voice created by his absence was beginning to affect Bluestreak. It was affecting everyone at this point.

He just wanted them to be together again. They were getting back in order now, with Wildrider in better shape, and Rachel and Danny returned to them mostly unharmed. They had a plan to fight the
drones… and… things just seemed lighter. Faster and more volatile, but the dark cloud hanging over them wasn't nearly as ominous.

If only they could find Vortex. Then it'd be okay for real. Bluestreak sighed and watched the people mill around. He hoped his friend was okay. He hoped more than anything that Vortex would come back. He also hoped Vortex knew that he was missed. All Bluestreak could do at this point was pray.

"Blue?"

Bluestreak looked down in surprise and saw Kass standing a few feet away. She was wringing her hands like she did when she was nervous, but judging by how she had just come from talking with her new friends, she was probably waiting to see his reaction. That made Bluestreak feel sad; he never used to make Kass feel nervous. This was just another bad thing to come from his insecurities.

"Hi, Kass," he said. He crouched and then sat down, so she could walk up closer and not have to crane her neck to meet his optics.

Kass took a deep breath. "I know you're probably not in the mood…" she began. She offered a small smile. "But Sam invited me to come with him, Bumblebee, Mikaela and Miles back to Nevada. They need to pick up more clothes for Miles, and Mikaela wanted to make sure her father's business was still secure… we thought now would be a good time. Things are going to be really busy soon."

Of course they would want to go before the drone hunts really got serious. With Wildrider out of harm's way and NEST officials caught up in serious discussions all day long, it would be easiest for the teens to slip off for a day trip, just to stay out of the way. Bluestreak felt better that Bumblebee was going with them, plus the idea of Kass having a small break away from the complications on base was a good one. She deserved time away from the med-bay after all those hours she had clocked in helping to save Wildrider.

"Oh…" He forced a smile for her sake and successfully fought down the nervousness in his own spark. This was about her and he could give her a day to herself, couldn't he? "If you want to go, you can. You don't need to ask me."

"No, I did, because you're invited, too," Kass replied, smiling. Bluestreak stopped in surprise. "We can… maybe get some fresh air? Just for a day?"

Her shy suggestion made Bluestreak stumble mentally. He was invited to go…? His optics immediately flew to the end of the hangar, where Sam, Mikaela and Miles stood waiting, talking amongst themselves amiably. He didn't not want to be around them. It was just… hard to be there when Kass seemed to talk as openly with them as she did with him or their other friends.

But…

Bluestreak knew he had to start letting go of those he still could count on returning to him. He was strong enough to do that if he tried.

"…Okay." Bluestreak smiled at Kass, who smiled back brightly. He nodded, far more sure of himself and the decision now. "I'll go with you."

Maybe he could be friends with Mikaela, Sam, even Miles, too. Bumblebee was a good companion as well. They had welcomed Kass with open arms. Bluestreak could do the same courtesy for them, too.

"There's my brave 'Bot," Kass laughed. She rested a hand on his knee and smiled kindly. "You
okay?"

Bluestreak hummed and extended a hand for her to grasp. "I'm okay."

Piece by piece, things were getting better already.

End Chapter 38.

Chapter End Notes

Vortex brings home unwanted guests, and then Jazz realizes something so incredibly important, that one young man from Nevada will never be quite the same again. Oh, and that time travel thing? Yeah. That.

A/Ns:
-"we landed in 2008" – Yeah. That again. ;)
-We are using the IDW definition of "deca-cycle" here, which is approximately 3 weeks. Thanks tfwiki!
-"Take me to your leaders" OH COME ON how often does a writer have the chance to use that?!
-Vos is, in this story canon, where the Seekers primarily worked as space explorers and scientists.
Chapter Notes

Hope is restored and suddenly, things begin to make sense. Or at least they will, very, very soon. Please follow along closely, as the science today gets to fight for dominance alongside a little thing I like to call cosmic luck. :D Of course, with the end of the mystery comes the beginning of a war. Buckle your seatbelts, this is going to get very wild very soon! Thank you again, Shantastic!

Shameless promotion: Don't forget to check out the poster I made for Fallout. It's available on my livejournal account (nan00kwrites) or my deviantart account directly (beccawashburn).

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

Disclaimer: Transformers (C) Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jazz had just logged on for monitoring duty, to follow the various teams that were out there hunting down and attempting to obliterate drone nests within American territory, when an alarm went off. He froze, waiting for some sort of sit-rep to go over the air. There were no explosions, no signs of violence—

Arcee's voice came across the channel. ::Vortex is back!::

At that, Jazz turned around and ran toward the outside of Hangar C, grinning happily.

And then Ironhide's booming voice followed the femme's. ::Decepticons have touched down on the east-side tarmac! Starscream is confirmed among them!::

The happiness immediately vaporized in his spark; Jazz's joy turned into terror and he ran even faster toward the designated area. This was bad—very, very bad. They didn't have many mechs on base right now! Thundercracker was off with search crews, as were Sideswipe, Hound and Trailbreaker, and Mirage was with Keller in Washington. Bluestreak wasn't around either, for some reason. Was this a counter-attack? Had Galvatron picked up on their plans to knock off the drones first? !

He transformed and shot across the airfield as quickly as he could, dodging the remaining soldiers as they scrambled for some sort of defensive position. His fear grew as he realized that he could not pick up any Decepticon energy signature on base, though he could feel Vortex's. He heard Prowl call for their search crews to return immediately to base, citing a possible attack—

And then he saw them. Jazz transformed and rolled to his pedes with his weapons raised directly at the four motionless figures that were already facing down Ironhide's impressive array of cannons and Jolt and Arcee's equally steady guns, each of them picking a different spark to target. Lennox and Epps had also rushed up with their men, packing sabot powered guns, some mounted to the back of their military jeeps.
Jazz immediately picked out who they were dealing with. This was not an attack, clearly, since their unwanted visitors were just standing there; their energy signatures were blocked so perfectly he knew they were using Ops grade equipment and techniques. Either they were there to cause damage once the Autobots assembled in force, in some sort of mocking gesture, or they were there on diplomatic reasons, hence the lack of violence.

That didn't exactly ring true to Jazz's processors as he took in the massive—and whoa, did he mean massive—mechs. There were two obvious fliers; Starscream stood out immediately. The Decepticon Air Commander stood there with bared teeth and looked like he was about to literally fly off at any given moment.

Shockingly, Vortex stood next to him, visor pinned to the other flier, obviously waiting to circumvent that if it happened. Jazz wanted nothing more than to rush up to Vortex, but he waited—mainly because of the other two mechs standing to his left.

The large white mech was a shuttle, or some sort of space transport, and stood passively in front of the NEST soldiers. He was bigger than Thundercracker, but to be honest, Jazz was more concerned with the only-slightly-smaller blue mech standing next to him, considering he was vaguely certain that was motherfucking Soundwave.

"Who the hell are you?" Lennox demanded, breathless, his gun and the guns of all of the mechs and soldiers pointed directly at the four mechs.

"My name is Skyfire," the shuttle said, his voice startlingly accented. Australian. He gestured calmly to the scarily familiar blue and silver mech beside him. "This is Soundwave. You know Starscream, whom we've instructed not to speak until we have secured further protections from your leaders."

"We know who they are!" Jazz snapped, keeping his cannons pointed directly at Skyfire. He glanced nervously to the side, eyeing Soundwave warily. "What are you doing here? ! What do you want? !"

Skyfire spoke politely, his blue optics not calming in the least. "We are here to warn you. To help you," he said. He tilted his helm down at the saboteur. "You are Jazz, the leader of the time travelers?"

Jazz stared at the other mech, processors surging. He knew about the time traveling? But that meant…

"…Vortex?" he asked, turning with a heavy spark toward the only friendly face in the new group. Oh, Primus, don't tell me…

Vortex, despite clearly knowing he was under suspicion, stepped forward a little. "Listen to them, Jazz. It's not what you think," he said, earnest. He looked to Skyfire and Soundwave, who listened silently. "I went with them because they needed me to sneak back onto the Decepticon shuttle here on Earth. It worked. Starscream stole information from Galvatron, just like he did in our time. This isn't the Soundwave who attacked the base, either."

Jazz didn't know how to reply to that. Vortex… was working with Soundwave? No, not just Soundwave. This Skyfire was an Autobot apparently, but not on any official records. But Starscream as well?

This whole time Vortex had spent within the Decepticon ranks? He'd snuck in, all by himself? ! Jazz gaped at his friend, horrified.

Looking back at Jazz, Vortex nodded, severe. "We know what's happening now, Jazz. We know
nearly everything."

"Like…?" Arcee prompted, calmer than Jazz felt, though the tremor in her arm gave away her stress.

"Where Nemesis is, plus where the drones will be located," Skyfire answered, earning their attention again. He was a decent talker. "The intel will likely change very soon, but we have their intended locations." He dared to smiled, faintly. "We have a chance at defeating them, my friends."

Jazz looked frantically to the side, catching Ironhide and Jolt's gazes. It didn't seem like they knew what to do either. This was crazy. Below them, the humans all shifted nervously. Jazz saw Barns staring over at Vortex in shock, but the human then turned his attention to Skyfire and Soundwave.

"Who are you, really?" Barns asked, voice startling the mechs into looking down at him in surprise, clearly not having expected the humans to interfere now.

Despite appearing surprised he was being spoken to by a human, Skyfire recovered quickly. "We are from the future, like yourselves," he said, inclining his helm over toward Soundwave. "Myself, Soundwave, and the others are the reason you are here at all, it would seem."

There was a pause as all of that caught up to his audience. Barns was speechless and the other Autobots appeared stunned. Jazz felt his spark shiver in fear as well as realization.

No… way.

"…Holy slag," he said, vocalist hissing. He looked between Soundwave and Skyfire wildly. He wasn't sure why he was afraid, but he was. "Y-you're th' scientists! Th' ones who made th' bridge!"

There had been eight, but they had only found six bodies. Now, standing before them, were two giants. One Decepticon, one Autobot, both of whom Jazz couldn't even begin to trust. Wheeljack had known who they were, the ones who got through, but refused to say—because he said he didn't want to scare his friends.

Jazz made a mental note that if he ever caught up with Wheeljack in the Well of Sparks, he was going to kick his aft.

Skyfire was oblivious to his internal panicking. "Yes. We are all that's left," he explained calmly. He peered around at the Autobots assembled specifically. "Perceptor was supposed to have deactivated the bridge. I suppose he either failed, or you fixed it."

"A little o' both." Jazz could barely keep his weapons up; his arm was shaking. "Primus… you're…"

"I will tell you everything that you want to know," the shuttle replied. He glanced around again, probably trying to find the officers in charge. "But first, we must discuss how to destroy the drones. Do that, and I assure you, Earth will be saved."

Ironhide snarled. "How can we trust you? You're no Autobots! Your optics might be blue, but what about his? !" he demanded, pointing his cannon directly at Soundwave, who didn't even flinch.

There was a tense pause. Skyfire didn't look alarmed at all and Soundwave, of course, didn't ever let emotion slip past his mask. Vortex had the decency to look nervous, and Starscream continued to make glances at the sky, waiting for an escape. Jazz just wanted to get Vortex out of there, but he didn't trust the other three to get close enough to grab him.

Skyfire finally caved to the silence and folded his hands over each other. "I never was a Decepticon. I followed in my brothers' footsteps, but I knew they were wrong. I did what I had to, to survive,
nothing more or less," he said slowly. He glanced at Starscream before continuing, the Seeker snarling at him faintly. "I found a chance to escape and enlisted with a small Autobot cruiser as a defector. When we were sent to Earth, I saw the devastation Megatron had brought to another innocent world. And I was helpless to do anything about it. I spent almost a decade wandering through that Hell.

"When I met Perceptor… I knew… it was my chance to redeem my soul," he said, almost like he was admitting a secret.

Beside him, Soundwave rumbled, which was enough to catch everyone's attention. He didn't move, clearly understanding if he did, all of them would immediately fire upon him. He was too dangerous not to. "Soundwave: survivor of Galvatron," the Decepticon general said bluntly, his mechanical voice making the humans jump more. "Galvatron: a fool. Merciless, mad fool."

Soundwave paused, and Jazz had the impression he wasn't able to speak more, though the notion of the Decepticon communications officer actually stumbling over words was crazy.

"Soundwave: …tired," Soundwave said at length. His visor shifted over to Skyfire, who nodded subtly. Whatever that meant, Jazz didn't know. He was still trying to get past the fact they suddenly had a Decepticon general—two Decepticon generals—on their doorstep as defectors.

"We both made the choice to work with the Autobots when we found them. It was Perceptor's idea to create the bridge, Hook's to hide in the mountains. There were eight of us in all… together, we made the bridge," Skyfire continued. He stared directly into Soundwave's visor and seemed to ignore the rest of their audience. "Together… we agreed to go through the bridge."

Jolt snorted and almost sneered at the two taller mechs. "Figures you'd let the Autobots do the dangerous work… sacrificing their sparks to make it work," he goaded, well versed in the time-travelers' backstory by now. "All you had to do was head to a nice future. Not as dangerous."

"We weren't headed toward the future," Skyfire replied, a bit sharper than before. He tilted his helm. "We were headed to Cybertron. That in itself was the far more dangerous part, don't you agree?"

At first, Jazz had to agree; Cybertron was way more unstable and dangerous than any Earth was, even in the middle of an apocalypse—

But then, it hit him.

_We were headed to Cybertron._

Jazz heard one of the humans drop a walkie-talkie and he saw Jolt's jaw drop as they too picked up on what was just said.

"...Whoa… what?" he tried ask, processors spinning. That was… impossible. Not to mention completely useless. They had been trying to save Earth, to get to this time period—why the frag would they both to go to Cybertron? ! It was crazy!

Vortex said nothing and neither did Soundwave. Skyfire, of course, had the nerve to smile.

"I heard from Vortex that one of your humans figured it out, partially. I hope to meet him, someday. You cannot have a time machine going back further than the time it was made. Obviously," he said. Skyfire seemed amused, oblivious to how much of a punch his words were having. "So we had to point the machine at a known space bridge corresponding with the year we wanted."

That amusement faded into a grimace on the shuttle's faceplates. "Unfortunately… that bridge was
not on Earth. The only one we knew of that had survived the war was on Cybertron, in a very remote scientific outpost."

Jazz gaped at the other mech, processors whirling faster and hotter than ever, as he tried to comprehend what he had just heard.

No… that wasn't… *that made no sense*…!

"Wait, wait…" he tried to say, lowering his weapon finally, because it suddenly felt too heavy to hold up. "Are you telling me… no. That's nuts." Jazz looked at Vortex, who was unhelpfully silent, and then back to Skyfire, unable to process what was happening.

"We went through the same bridge," Arcee added, optics huge. "We—we landed on Earth. Not Cybertron!"

"I have been questioning that myself, since Vortex explained it," Skyfire said simply. He looked back to Soundwave briefly. "However, I believe the answer lies with *our* actions yet again. When we landed on Cybertron, we thought we had reached the correct year, but we were rapidly losing ground and time. We needed to reach Earth quickly. We decided to use the receiver bridge as a space bridge, just as it had been created to do

A pin could have dropped on that airfield and they would have heard it. For a brief moment, Jazz almost wanted to run the other way and not hear the rest of this.

"We directed it as closely as we could to Earth," Skyfire continued. "But we failed. We had landed on Cybertron in the year 2008. We missed Mission City."

Missed Mission City? As in… they hadn't been the reason for all the changes? It made sense, sort of. No one could recall seeing any unidentified mechs at any point before or after the battle of Mission City in this timeline. Mechs as huge as Skyfire and Soundwave wouldn't have gone unnoticed.

"But…then how…?" Jazz asked, mind reeling.

"We had to leave the space-bridge on, Jazz," Skyfire answered. His shook his helm again. "That's why Perceptor stayed behind in 2032. Someone has to close the bridges once they are opened."

Brief, furious images of Wheeljack at his control station seared Jazz's processors. "No one closed the bridge after us on Cybertron, and you wouldn't have known if your Wheeljack friend had not told you anything—"

Arcee's engines suddenly revved. "We could have died!" she exclaimed. Horrified. "Wheeljack had no idea they left the bridge open on Cybertron, had he? He sent us out there without a clue—!"

Skyfire shot her a look. "Don't forget that Wheeljack was a genius. Perhaps he assumed that exactly what happened would happen. He had Perceptor's notes, after all. We wrote everything down. Wheeljack knew the space-time bridge was pointed at an active space bridge location. The location of that particular space bridge was in an area of Cybertron that had long been uninhabited. It was logical that Soundwave and I would leave the bridge open, keep our team together, rather than leave one of us behind to close it. Thus, he sent you here."

Arcee gaped at him in silence and Jazz found it difficult to keep standing straight. This was all… it was insane.

But… it made sense. It was the only way for the time jump to make sense. There were no time machines on Earth. Jazz himself couldn't think of a space bridge that was still operational. They had to have been on Cybertron. They had never suspected it, simply due to the insanity of such a plot.
Jazz knew they had overlooked it in search of something simple. Something… not so scary.

"Wow," Epps said, breaking the silence. He stared up at Ironhide and Jazz, eyes huge. "That is one fucking leap of faith right there. Jesus."

Jazz couldn't do much else than revel in the terror of it all. "No wonder he didn't tell us the truth… He wasn't just trying to make sure we went without him," he said faintly.

"He wanted to make sure we weren't afraid of the negative chances we were facing," Arcee added, still stunned. "Primus."

"It would have been the only way to save you all. Your friend was a genius and a hero," Skyfire replied gently. He seemed to withdraw a bit, even as he defended their friend. "Do not forget that."

"Maintenant," Barns interrupted, sputtering. "You are telling me that the bridge on Cybertron was still open?"

Soundwave tilted his helm at the human, startling many of NEST. "Affirmative," he said, mechanical voice always odd to hear out loud.

Skyfire nodded as well. "We used it as a single-sided transporter, so we had no need to have a receiver bridge on the other side, here in this area of land. It was the only way for this to work," he elaborated.

"It was still open when we used the bridge in 2054… so…” Barns trailed off, voice growing smaller as his eyes grew larger. He sputtered in uncharacteristic shock. "Bon sang, did we sling-shot through time and space?"

Skyfire smiled. "An adequate analogy. When you used the bridge as a time machine, you were pointed at an active transporter. Therefore, it redirected you straight to present day Earth," he said. He glanced over at Jazz and looked amused. "Congratulations to your humans. If you count your molecules being shifted through Cybertronian airspace as being on Cybertron, they're the first of their kind to land on another planet, albeit for probably half of a half of a nano-second."

There was another pause.

"What the FUCK," Kane exclaimed. Jazz echoed the sentiment within his own processors, struggling to keep up with all of the information he had just heard. He was mildly impressed the humans were following this too, because personally, he wished they had just gotten him the SparkNotes instead.

"As you say, I'm just the messenger," the shuttle mech replied, holding his hands up in defense. "Your friend took a large risk sending the organics through with you, with only Perceptor's notes and our plans to trust, but I know… I know what kind of life you have left behind." He again focused on Jazz, his words much more potent than he realized. "His sacrifice and choices were well made. Just understand that."

"We won't forget," Vortex said suddenly. All eyes and optics turned to him and he looked back, fearless. "He closed the bridge before he died, otherwise we would be swarmed with those drones at this point." He hesitated. "He did everything… for us."

Ironhide made a rumbling sound that helped to drag Jazz away from the light-headedness the explanations had left him with. Instead, however, Jazz was filled with a new sort of nervousness as he was finally able to ignore their unwanted Decepticon guests and focus on the one mech among the four that actually mattered to him.
Jazz wanted to believe Vortex had done what he did to help Earth, to help their friends. In fact, he did believe that. What he couldn't trust were the faces of Starscream and Soundwave staring down at him with equal distrust. Jazz turned slowly away from them and focused on Vortex, who almost looked like he had anticipated the attention.

"...Vortex..." Jazz began. He shook his helm, praying his friend would listen to him especially close. "I trust you. I trust you like I trust anyone else in our group. So if I ask you if this is true... an' if I can trust you with our lives with these two...?"

Vortex stared down at him and slowly nodded.

Then, unexpectedly, his battlemask retracted. Jazz jerked back in shock; he had never seen Vortex remove it outside of consuming energon or during emergencies. Now, the helicopter stood there, tense and exposed, but his mouth was now visible. A show of trust—something Jazz knew Vortex valued more than anything.

"You can, Jazz," the helicopter said quietly.

Beside him, Arcee made a soft sighing sound and completely retracted her weapons. That was another show of trust that humbled Jazz yet again.

"...I trust you then," he said up at Vortex. Jazz grinned and barely restrained himself from hugging the taller mech. The tension between them had all but evaporated. "Goddamn, mech, it is good t' see you."

"Hn." The helicopter seemed to shrug, trying to be neutral. He glanced around behind Jazz, Barns and Arcee. "I take it no one died while I was gone?"

Jazz had to laugh a little. "Well, 'Rider and Rachel almost did." Vortex froze and sent Jazz a horrified look. Jazz laughed again. "I said 'almost', 'Tex. Wildrider is in recovery and Rachel just got in. She's okay. Drones blew her helicopter up, but the suit thing WJ made her saved her aft."

"What helicopter? !" Vortex sputtered, looking around wildly for the human in question. Jazz was mildly pleased by his frantic behavior. "And what suit? ! Where is she? !"

He almost laughed. "Apparently we have a lot t' catch up on," he said. His smile turned wan when he glanced over at Skyfire, Soundwave and Starscream specifically. "Which is good, 'cause you guys owe us a full sit-down explanation. Let's get started, hmm?"

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The initial panic of having two massive Decepticon generals on base didn't last long, even after the advanced spark signature blocking was removed for Starscream and Skyfire. As expected, the Autobots quickly regained a semblance of order and moved Starscream to the brig for a proper interrogation. Vortex had been herded off by Ratchet to the medbay to properly refuel and to get first aid on some injuries he had sustained (Jazz couldn't wait to hear where they had come from.)

Skyfire accompanied him, probably both to serve a supplement of intelligence as well as to keep a physical presence near Starscream to remind him to behave. Despite his shady background, Skyfire had apparently been an Autobot and was given a little more benefit of the doubt. He had told Prowl that anything he saw fit to do with the shuttle was fine, but Prowl had said that for now he was free to move within sight of Ironhide or another Autobot.

Soundwave had left, which was all right by Jazz's standards but had given Ironhide fits. Jazz got the idea that he still needed to spy on Galvatron, and would be back later most likely, using the ruse of
hunting Starscream down. It had been an odd good-bye, with Skyfire almost affectionately grasping the technopath's shoulder and the gesture had been returned before Soundwave moved away and teleported elsewhere (Serbia according to Skyfire). No one said anything, but Jazz had been startled by the… friendship between the two mechs.

…Then again, Jazz had to admit he was not really able to pass judgment on inter-factional relationships. He decided to drop the topic entirely when attentions moved back to their more prolific guest.

As it turned out, Starscream had been told (under threat of pain via Soundwave, which did not fail to amuse Jazz terribly) to be silent until they could speak with Prowl as well as Ironhide about some sort of deal. Starscream wanted protection in exchange for pretty much, well, everything.

Ironhide had immediately put up a fight and said there was no way they would ever give a 'Con such as Starscream amnesty at this stage of the war.

And then Starscream started talking.

Even Ironhide shut up at that point, because everything he said, even if it was all lies, was more than they had ever hoped to find out on their own. Thundercracker had already told them a significant amount about Decepticon military tactics and the locations of some energon caches, but Starscream had been second-in-command of the Decepticons, plus he had actually commanded the army for the last twenty mega-vorns. His and Soundwave's data transfers (first cleared by Ratchet and then transferred onto data pads instead of a mech) had left Prowl in impressed silence.

"Nemesis is waiting just outside the posterior border of your asteroid field," Starscream said, looking completely at ease on the floor of the newly constructed brig (Prowl had refused to let Ironhide name it in Wildrider's honor, saying Sideswipe was also a candidate for temporary incarceration). "Galvatron is waiting to make the strike, despite my attempts to tell him that waiting is ludicrous. Now would be the perfect time for the Decepticons to strike, before you have your own reinforcements."

Prowl nodded haltingly after silently clearing something with Ironhide over their comms. "He is correct. The Hyperion will be here within two, perhaps three weeks…" He frowned down at the Seeker. "Why the wait?"

Starscream sneered. "I have no idea. The intelligence I gathered from Galvatron's data logs only indicated that the Autobots were not to be harmed." He shifted uneasily. "Yet, at least."

Jazz felt everyone's unease grow at the mention of this order. They had all heard from Prowl and Thundercracker about the odd order their Seeker had picked up over Los Angeles.

"What's he waiting for?" Ironhide demanded, citing the question that had been haunting them ever since.

"The drones, clearly." Skyfire interjected, frowning. He had not been told to sit, but everyone still kept him in their sights as a potential threat. "The intel also showed many mentions of Galvatron being aware of and preparing for the drones, including intended locations. You've already discovered them, however."

Lennox nodded. "Yeah, via the gamma ray maps."

"Perhaps that's it. He's waiting for the drones to assemble, and then he'll bring his troops down for a mass invasion," Prowl said, optics narrowed and doorwings flared, which easily told Jazz how hard
he was thinking now. "Lining up his game board with all his pieces first, it would seem."

"He's developed obsessive compulsive behaviors, according to Starscream and Soundwave's reports," Arcee added, looking down at the datapad in her hands. "It would make about as much sense as anything to suggest that scenario."

The idea of Galvatron repeatedly scrubbing down his servos or his desk gave Jazz at least a small moment to smile. One more weakness to exploit…

"Great," Lennox said, catching all their attentions. He glanced around at his allies. "What does this mean though, guys?"

Epps scoffed. "It means we have to move our asses to kill those drones before they make their army and summon the whole horde down." Most of their members nodded in agreement.

"Don't count on it, fleshling." Starscream suddenly said, making the humans jump a little and Ironhide glare. The Seeker smiled darkly. "Galvatron may be insane, but he's paranoid. He will know I am speaking to you. If anything, he may lose all control and summon Nemesis down regardless of the drones' preparedness."

That was a threat they all had to be prepared for. Skyfire sent Starscream a reprimanding glance, but refocused on the Autobots.

"Soundwave is keeping tabs, but he cannot always get the information out. He must act carefully," he said in warning. "If Galvatron changes his plans, we may be able to know ahead of time."

"Keller's been speaking to all the nations he can, arranging for their armies as well as ours to investigate the locations indicated by the gamma ray maps," Lennox replied, running a hand through his hair. This entire procedure had drained everyone. "But Rachel's experience proved that we need overwhelming firepower and larger teams to actually get rid of the drones. We've already been cleared for most of Europe and Canada, so as soon as we get word that we've got the firepower and support we need, we'll move out as quickly as we can."

They had to wait for Keller to return their calls, and then when the other search teams came back, they could get a group analysis on exactly what their next best move was. For now, it was an awkward stand-still. Starscream continued to lean against the brig wall, far too comfortable for anyone's liking.

"…Thank you, Starscream," Prowl said at length, when their interrogation was completed. To his credit, he sounded professional. Jazz could see the clear disdain for the Seeker in his posture, however. "This has been helpful."

"Just keep your word, Autobot," Starscream snarled, eyeing him back with contempt.

Prowl didn't spare him the barest flinch. "Granted we all live long enough to the end of this, I will honor your amnesty request," he said coolly. "If we don't, well, I suppose it won't matter."

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By the time they were done speaking with Starscream and were ready to leave him in the brig, Sideswipe and Trailbreaker had returned from their scouting missions, and were able to help Ironhide. Skyfire accompanied the rest back to Hangar C, though due to his size, they were stuck out in the open instead of going into the command center. Vortex reappeared from the medbay and willingly sat down for a proper debriefing. Jazz could see that the helicopter was eager to go back to Hangar B to see their friends, but this had to come first.
There were a lot of questions that needed to be answered.

"You guys really built th' machine?" Jazz began, looking directly into Skyfire's blue visor.

The giant shuttle was seated, but still towered over the vast majority of them. The humans were stuck up on the catwalks to be eye-level.

"Yes," Skyfire replied, ever calm. He did hesitate a little, glancing back at Vortex and then back to Jazz and Arcee. "I... had not anticipated being one of the ones to go through, but Perceptor thought it would be best. Most of the others were too damaged or weak to survive the trip to Cybertron. My size and affiliation to the Autobots, no matter how new, was a deciding factor. Soundwave's innate knowledge of the Decepticons, as well as his strength decided it for him as well."

Barns had insisted on being there for the debriefing. "Crazy..." he murmured, his eyes huge.

Skyfire inclined his helm. "Yes. But what's done is done," he said in a voice that sounded far, far older than before. Jazz could hear himself in that voice, as well as the voices of the majority of his family.

A story formed, one that Jazz could not help but relate to in ways that the other Autobots would never be able to understand. Skyfire had meant to defect shortly after their mass exodus from Cybertron, after the planetary cores began to fail, but could not do so until he finally was able to sabotage his ship and reach an Autobot vessel. When he had finally been cleared for active duty, they had begun to seek out, like the majority of Autobot forces spread out across the stars, their Prime.

That had led them to Earth. They had landed right in the middle of Galvatron's genocide, apparently; ironically, it wasn't too far off from the present date, Skyfire pointed out with a small smile. His counterpart was most likely on his way to Earth without a clue of his presence on the planet right now.

He ran into Soundwave in the wilderness of Southern Europe and after a brief uncertainty, they had realized that fighting each other would be pointless. They struck up a friendship that was not so different from the one Jazz and Thundercracker had. What was so odd was the fact that Soundwave was not just a survivor.

Soundwave, as it turned out to the surprise of all and shock of some, had been the one to kill Galvatron outright. He did not have the chance to take any usable data, as he had turned their ship into a bomb just to kill the fragging mech.

"He has always been the better of our duo," Skyfire said, though Jazz couldn't see how that was right. Soundwave had still done terrible things as Megatron's third in command. Skyfire smiled in a distant way, almost ignoring those around him. "I cannot explain what is impossible to understand unless you witnessed what I have. Regardless, we found each other and learned to survive the terror of the drones."

They met the other scientists in southern France; Perceptor had escaped the compound Wheeljack had worked at in Portugal, and had assumed Wheeljack was dead just like Wheeljack had thought his friend was dead. They had escaped to the mountains, and then after a tense time of spark-searching, they had realized that although the war had been lost for them, they could save at least one version of their world. They had built the machine to travel to the past, to try to prevent their doomed present from ever happening.

From there, they asked him lots of other questions. Where had he and Soundwave been for the past
year? Skyfire said they had been lying low to avoid ruining their chances at infiltrating the Decepticons, choosing to hide in the most inhospitable or remote locations to avoid detection. What was their goal here? They planned to use Soundwave's presence in the Decepticon forces to get close enough to assassinate Galvatron, preferably during a full-out battle so they could hit him with multiple attackers all at once.

They asked him why Soundwave had destroyed the Shard, and Skyfire quickly defended his friend, saying that it had been this world's Soundwave, whom they had since deactivated. Skyfire regretted not getting involved sooner, but they had been trying to move slowly, working to locate the Decepticon shuttle and figure out how to infiltrate it. They simply had not taken Soundwave out soon enough.

That prompted a question that continued to haunt at least Jazz's mind for the last four months.

"Why did they destroy the All Spark?" he asked, knowing he sounded desperate.

Skyfire hesitated at last over that one. "That… is not such an easy thing to understand," the shuttle said, sounding strained. "Starscream didn't hear this directly from the Fallen, but he got enough from Galvatron's rants, plus the files he stole.

Apparently, the Fallen had contacted the Decepticons out of no where and never showed his face. He made demands Starscream had ignored, but this world's Soundwave had eventually obeyed.

"It was the Fallen who told this world's Soundwave to destroy the Shard. They believed him, because of his power," Skyfire explained. He looked pained now, clearly upset over their mistakes. "We had been waiting for a chance to infiltrate the Decepticons… and when we heard about the Shard… it was a total failure on our parts. The same with Prime. Our desire to be stealthy and patient saw to the same mistakes of our past anyway."

As much as it hurt to hear they could have stopped both tragedies… no one could really say they didn't do enough.

"You did what you could," Jolt admitted.

"Not enough," Skyfire insisted. He reminded Jazz of Optimus, which hurt a little; both mechs were far too self-critical.

Lennox was frustrated over this. "Why would anyone deliberately destroy a power source like that, though? Is the Fallen nuts?" he asked.

"Probably, but not in a way we expected," Vortex interrupted. He suddenly looked nervous, the emotion highlighted by the fact his battlemask was still withdrawn. "He hates Primus."

"He hates Primus?" Jolt asked, not able to hide his surprise.

Vortex became flustered. "He isn't just a mech. I-I don't know what he is, and neither does Starscream," he said. He glanced to Skyfire, who was unhelpfully leaving him to explain. "But what is clear is that the Fallen is a follower of Unicron. He hates Primus. He's taken the old legends and just—he follows them to the letter."

After quickly explaining their religion to the humans, Jazz was glad his human friends were quick on the uptake. "Wait, so he… he's a Unicron groupie?" Epps said, the analogy oddly fitting. "And… because of that, he wanted to destroy the All Spark to spite the Primus guy?"
"Essentially. Also to remove any power similar to his. That's why he wanted Prime dead, as the carrier of the Matrix," Vortex said. He shook his helm and his mouth was drawn into a tight frown as he looked specifically over at Jazz. "This is about a religious nutjob. The Fallen—he literally believes he's the Unmaker's chosen one, or something equally as crazy."

All of that made them fall in an uneasy silence. Unmaker? Jazz knew those were the words of an insane mech. The humans probably would agree as well; they were used to religion turning ordinary killers into mass grave fillers.

But the Cybertronians did not think to laugh it off. Jazz felt a twinge of fear at the idea of one of their own using their much more lax faith (compared to the humans' at least) as a reason for fighting. It just... didn't happen. That was a human way of causing wars. Cybertronians had never seen faith as something to exploit or force on others. Compared to the human way of life, their religion was more of a historical lesson than something to base their lives around now.

Something felt wrong about this. Something felt very, very wrong, even if the Fallen was just a crazy mech.

Jolt made a sound that caught their attention. "Wait... I don't get it," he said, looking at Skyfire. "If you guys showed up in 2008, then why... why did the battle of Mission City go differently? No one new was there, but it's different."

"I've had nearly two years to wonder that myself," the shuttle murmured, turning his head away as he laid his hands on his knees. "It... it's not a matter of science anymore, I think."

Jolt and Epps shared a look. "Oh?"

Skyfire hesitated and seemed to consider what he could say to explain. Jazz sat down, both eager and nervous to hear. This had been a heavy shadow dragging behind them for a long time now. They now knew how they'd gotten here... but... somehow, Jazz wondered if it even mattered. So much didn't line up the way it should have.

"Time is not a straight line, as we all have learned," Skyfire began calmly. "Time is constantly changing, constantly flowing. Like a river, moving around rocks, where we, the living, are the rocks." He gestured with his hand, as if showing them what he was describing. "You can place the same rock in front of a stream of water time and time again, but you cannot get all of the molecules of the water to flow the same way twice. It will always be different, every time we glimpse back on one sleeve of time or another."

Jazz and the other mechs followed, though Lennox and Epps seemed unsure. Barns was hanging onto every word the white mech was saying, enraptured.

Skyfire folded his hands in his lap and Jazz recognized it was to keep from moving them; a nervous twitch. "You said that this Mission City happened differently from the one in our past. Why?" he asked, rhetorically. "Why did ours turn out the way it did? There is no hard evidence for this. No proof. No science." He paused and an odd look passed over his faceplates. "Just... luck."

Again silence fell and Jazz found it difficult to find something to use in reply to that. Luck? It couldn't have been that simple. Luck was an excuse, Rachel had once said with the wisdom of a mind that saw things with harsh honesty. Luck... wasn't...

After everything? *Everything*? All of the science? All of the machines that were built, deconstructed and then rebuilt? Jazz felt strangely... disappointed. Didn't all of that *matter*?
Lifting his helm high, Skyfire's smile was gentle. It couldn't quite hide the tremor in his limbs, as he too realized the gravity of what he was saying.

"It was luck that saved Sam Witwicky that day. It was luck that let you keep Prime for as long as you did. It was luck that the shrapnel fell the way it did, only maiming instead of killing many of your troops. It was luck that led this world's Jazz to die at Megatron's hands." Skyfire laughed, optics shuttering quietly. "Because luck isn't science. It's beyond mortal hands. It was chance that led us to this moment, this specific moment." He opened them again and his gaze pierced through Jazz. "Not choice and not unchangeable destiny."

"But why?" Arcee asked, sounding strained. It was all so much to contemplate.

"Because we are the rocks. We, living creatures, both organic and metal," he replied, again calm. "Primus gave us a single purpose, I can only imagine now. That is, to affect the current in this grander universe he made for us." He inclined his helm and seemed amused by something. "…Because we can."

Inwardly, Jazz realized that they had in some way discovered a way to substantiate the concept of free will and its effects on time and space—but he decided it wasn't the best time to mention it. Rachel was going to have kittens.

This was one hell of an afternoon, he thought in a daze.

He wasn't sure how it happened. Maybe it was all the talk about luck. Maybe it was how his thoughts turned to Optimus, and he wondered what the Prime would have made of this. He still didn't quite know how he slipped away momentarily on the conversation, as his friends talked quietly about how ridiculous Skyfire's theory was, or how much it made sense in the long-term, but in the middle of everything, Jazz stumbled across a theory of his own.

"…I…" he began, startling both himself and his companions.

Prowl stared at him expectantly. "What is it?"

Jazz didn't even know where to begin. "…You know what?" he said, processors trying not to trip over each other as he mapped out what he wanted to say. "Maybe that was it."

"What was?" Barns asked, surprised as he stared at his friend from the catwalk.

Shaking his helm, Jazz was barely able to formulate the right words to say. "Th' one thing that started this… this change…" he began slowly. "It wasn't Prime survivin'. It wasn't me dyin'. It wasn't Bee, or Mikaela, or Epps, or any of us—"

All at once, the impossible made sense. It was sort of terrifying, but at this point, Jazz had learned to roll with the insanity, or it would have consumed him.

"It was Sam." His visor widened. "Sam… survived," he said. "Because he was th' first t' die in my world. He… survived here."

None of those around him reacted at first, at least, not positively. Skyfire looked mildly interested, but those who knew whom he was talking about directly were confused.

"But… he's just a kid. What's the difference?" Jolt asked, sharing the same bewildered expressions Prowl and Epps were sending him.

Jazz couldn't help but grin as he realized. "…Because he was th' one t' kill Megatron," he said. Not
Prime, because that would have killed both mechs. No, a human did, and he did it in a way that spared the Autobot leader. "Because he… he was th' one t' take th' All Spark."

Sam had saved Prime, Bumblebee, and many others. Sam was the start of the changes in the timeline; before his death, nothing else was different. It was only when Sam Witwicky survived that this world's timeline had abruptly changed for the better.

"What are you trying to say?" Lennox asked, baffled. The stunned (but always reserved) look on Prowl's faceplates, however, told Jazz the tactician had caught on as well.

"I'm sayin'…" Jazz explained slowly, mostly for his own benefit. "That kid? He saved more than just our afts that day. He saved a lot more than just one battle." He sat back and reveled in his discovery. "I think he's th' reason this world is th' way it is now."

Because Sam Witwicky—an awkward, young human child—dodged the right way. Because Sam, in all of his faults, managed to fail and succeed in all the right ways when it had mattered most. A single step, a rock deflected at the right or wrong moment in time, and the free will this organic possessed—there must have been billions of different outcomes for that first major battle. But in this version, Sam had survived. In this one… Sam Witwicky had made all the right choices.

Jazz stared out at his friends, awed.

Well. That was… mildly humbling.

"…Wow," Lennox breathed. He stared out in a similarly mind-blown way as he ran a hand through his hair. "He's going to be thrilled."

"Where is he anyway?" Jolt asked, causing most of them to flinch at the abrupt question that had nothing to do with quantum mechanics or cosmic-scale luck. Jazz glanced around them before realizing that he had no idea where the organic in question was.

Prowl sighed. "Apparently, according to Bumblebee's recent report, they went back to Nevada. Bluestreak went with them, because Kassandra wanted to go see Sam's home and Mikaela wanted to do some shopping," he said. He noticed Jazz and Barns' odd expressions they sent his way. "What?"

"I didn't think you'd let us go off base!" Jazz exclaimed.

Lennox did not look happy about this. "I wasn't aware she was. Great," he said irritably. His cellphone started to ring and he fished it out of his pocket. "Well, that's the least of my worries, honestly."

"Well, maybe we should get everyone back," Barns said, glancing up at the people in charge. He seemed eager to continue figuring out their plans, but with most of their team only on the return trip now, they had a little while to wait. "To begin with, how about we get Vortex over to our group?"

Jazz had attempted to say perhaps they should just wait until Thundercracker came back and then do that, but his focus on Skyfire, Vortex, or their other friends was derailed spectacularly when Lennox abruptly made a sound more akin to a cat lodged in an exhaust vent than anything human.

"Hello? Who is—Bluestreak?" the major yelled directly into his phone, eyes huge. "What did—Sam WHAT?"

And then, utter chaos.
Sam lived in a quaint little town. Kass had seen plenty of cities, so she knew it was just a town, but what had thrown her for a loop was the sheer number of people there. She knew she must have been seen as odd by Miles, who had sat with her inside of Bluestreak for the duration of the trip, since she kept looking out her window with a gaping jaw and wide eyes.

"Welcome to Small Town America," Miles had joked. Sam, over the radio inside Bumblebee who was driving ahead of them, grumbled to him to shut up with the lame jokes. Kass was too busy gawking at a man walking his dog to be able to defend the blond teen for trying.

This was… amazing. And terrifying. When they finally pulled up to Sam's house—a massive structure that seemed to have a hundred rooms from the outside, Bluestreak had barely been able to withhold his own bursting curiosity and paranoia.

"What if they see us?" he asked, sounding alarmed. "Will they come up and talk to us? All of them? There must be hundreds of people out there!" Kass didn't try to point out there were tens of thousands in this town probably.

"They won't see us because we will not be transforming," Bumblebee reassured him. "Perhaps if we stay after it gets dark we can stand up, but for now, let's not let the rest of the community know that Sam or Mikaela know aliens. Their anonymity protects them from the media."

Kass was glad she didn't have to worry about that too much; she didn't even really exist in this world, legally. She found it difficult to step outside of Bluestreak. The ground felt alien. Even the air felt different. She heard, far away, dogs and the sound of cars. She heard life. She saw the grass, all an odd green when winter should have made it yellow, and felt like she had stepped off onto another planet.

"We could go into town and grab food later," Sam offered. He shot Kass a look before quickly adding, "I mean, if you're all up to it. I don't think there'll be too many people out in this weather."

Mikaela tugged her jacket tighter and smiled thinly. "Yeah, maybe we can just cook something here," she said.

"Mom cleaned out the fridge before leaving," Sam warned. He shrugged. "Maybe we can order out."

With the other two humans walking toward the house ahead of them, Kass sent Miles an odd look. "Order out?" she repeated.

Miles smiled. "You know, order a pizza, or order some wings."

Kass found herself staring at him blankly. "They… bring food to your house?" she asked, now wondering if it was a joke.

"Yeah, it's a business," Miles said, not realizing why it was surprising to her. "You pay 'em for the food and…" He stopped and sent her a careful look before he tried to backtrack. "I mean, uh, it's normal for us. You know, part of our, um, economy. Just another business."

She let him ramble and nodded faintly, though her brain was still trying to catch up. People could just… call for food? The idea of a supermarket, where all of that food was just on display to be bought, had been difficult enough to wrap her mind around. To think that food could just magically appear for her to eat was… disturbing. It wasn't even a good thing. It just made her feel even more
They ended up ordering Chinese food. Kass had been drawn to the idea simply because she had never had the opportunity to get to know Asian cultures compared to the Euro-centric ones she had been immersed in growing up. Miles picked something out for her, going on her own request that it wasn't spicy.

In the meantime, they went on a tour of the Witwicky house. Mikaela did most of the tour guiding, since Sam didn't get the concept of describing things in detail, but Kass enjoyed every bit of it. She was fascinated by the wide-screen television, and the paintings. She especially loved the artwork Mrs. Witwicky hung up on the walls. It made her think of her sketchpad. She hadn't tried to draw anything since coming to this place. Maybe she should try soon.

The private bathroom was interesting, after months of using the public ones at the base, and then years of having nothing at all back in her old world.

"My hair is growing long," she said, peering into the bathroom mirror while the boys went off to wait for the food.

"Did you always have it cut short?" Mikaela asked, coming up behind her. Compared to Mikaela, Kass was horrendously pale and significantly less pretty. Well, to be honest, Mikaela sort of ugly-fied everything, according to Sam. Kass readily agreed.

"Well, yes. It was always easier to manage," Kass replied, smiling ruefully. "I wonder what I look like with it long."

Mikaela grinned over her shoulder and placed an encouraging hand on her head. "Well, you can find out now."

Ah, yes. Now. Kass had been hearing that sentiment a lot lately, including from herself. She could use showers now, make new friends now, go on car rides to new cities now... so many new things to do. If she wasn't careful, she was certain she would overwhelm herself.

A startling bell noise made Kass jump and look around wildly for some sort of reason there would be an alarm. Mikaela hurriedly reassured her it was just the doorbell—the noise was made when someone was at the door to meet them or to give them something—so they should head down to get their food.

Sam was already closing the front door with his foot while carrying two large brown paper bags in his arms. He shot Kass a dark look, which made her hesitate in confusion. What was wrong?

"Your buddy out there almost went to rush the poor delivery dude," he said, putting the food onto the table. He looked irritated. "I had to lie and say one of the tires was losing air and that's what made it jump. We're lucky Bee calmed him down first."

"Blue's... going to be high strung out here," Kass said lamely, glancing out the window to make sure the gray Datsun was still out there.

"Yeah! He's just looking out for us," Miles added. He grinned at Kass appreciatively. "He's a bro."

Kass smiled, mostly because she realized Miles really hadn't seen the animosity Bluestreak had had toward him earlier. Bluestreak had been remarkably civil lately, so she hoped those days were behind them. The less Miles was aware of in that case, the better.

Their meal was uneventful. Kass enjoyed it. It reminded her of her life at the camp with her parents
and brother. The food was all tasty; they had gotten more than they needed for her to sample from. She enjoyed all of it and was a bit embarrassed when she realized her friends had paid for her meal on top of everything else. It wasn't like she had money in any shape or form, but it was still a humbling gesture. She thanked them and, of course, they waved it away.

She wished fiercely that the time would come where she could successfully drag Rachel, Danny and Barns with her on a trip like this. They had all refused (rightfully so for Danny and Rachel, who were injured), but Kass now was determined to bridge her friends together. They'd be happy being around each other. They had so much to learn from one another.

When Miles accidentally brushed her hand with his while he reached for his drink, Kass hid a blush behind a feigned cough. Perhaps there was more to gain from these interactions, but she knew to pace herself. One step at a time.

They cleaned up their meal, placing any leftovers aside to bring back with them to the base because Kass refused to waste the valuable food. She'd share it with Barns, Danny and Rachel later. Sam continued the tour, leading them to his room. Kass was enamored by the decorations and the sheer size of the space. He even had his own bathroom!

He was so lucky, she thought, but didn't dare to say it out loud. Even if every single one of them was unlucky enough to be caught up in an intergalactic war… at least their childhoods had been remotely pleasant.

A surprising wave of bitterness flooded her, but she fought it down. She focused on the fact that Sam was sharing a piece of his life with them, talking about his possessions for her sake, and was content. He was a good friend. She couldn't begrudge him for things out of his control.

Mikaela soon became bored with Sam going through his comic books and basketball skills and sat down on his bed to try to fix her jacket zipper that had gotten stuck. That seemed to give Sam an idea and he rushed off to his wardrobe, digging through a mass of hanging shirts and jackets.

"I've never had that many clothes," Kass said, glancing over at Miles and Mikaela as their friend excavated through the maze. "We always had to travel light by default, so we ended up changing our two outfits in towns when we came across them instead of lugging a whole closet along with us."

"Mission City." Mikaela tried to make it more lighthearted than it was, which Kass appreciated. "At least you always had variety," she said.

"True," Kass said, smiling.

Sam suddenly made an Ah-Ha! sound, catching their attention. He turned away from the wardrobe with something hanging in his hands: a brown jacket. He held it up toward Miles and Kass specifically.

"I was wearing this on Doomsday," he said, oddly proud. He gave them a grin as he elaborated. "Mission City."

Mikaela made a disgusted face as she lay back on his rumpled bed. "Why'd you keep that?" she asked. "I threw my clothes out after Ratchet said something about radioactive dust from Megatron's weapons."

"He wasn't serious. It's like a battle flag for me," Sam said. His grin abruptly changed and faded like a receding wave. He stared at the jacket for a moment, caught up in thought until he finally said, "I killed Megatron wearing this."
All at once, the warmth in the room vanished. A cold intensity replaced it. Kass was distinctly aware of how Miles' nervousness increased at the mention of Sam being so directly involved with the war. She saw how Mikaela stopped acting shallow and immediately gave Sam a look of concern.

Sam stood there, cradling his jacket, looking at it as if he were trying to find all of the answers to their problems embroidered into its shredded surface.

"I just wish it would be that simple again," he said quietly. That killing would solve all of their problems.

Kass frowned. "Killing isn't something to make light of," she said. She shook her head at his pessimism. "You did well, Sam, but… don't feel like you need to have the weight of this war on your shoulders. Maybe you should be grateful."

She didn't mean to be condescending. Sam knew that, but his frustration was beginning to boil over now that they were away from the base, and in the peace of suburbia, he was able to really reflect on his helplessness.

"What else am I supposed to do?" he demanded, glaring with shining eyes. "This is probably one of the only things I will ever be remembered for. One of the only things that I ever did that made a difference." He stumbled over the words, getting choked up. "I…"

Mikaela was sending him a sad look, clearly wanting to cheer him up, and Miles stood by awkwardly without anything to say at all on the matter. Kass, for her part, waited patiently. She knew what Sam was going through. She understood his anger, even if she wanted to tell him to let it go, because just like the rest of them, his time may have passed to make a difference. That didn't make his efforts meaningless, though. He needed to understand that.

Something dark passed over Sam's eyes. "I'm sick of being useless!" He threw the jacket angrily at the closet.

Kass scowled when the jacket hit the floor with a loud thump and clink, too frustrated for words.

"Getting worked up over something so pointless is useless. Stop trying to demonize yourself for things you aren't in control over, things you never were in control over!"

That's what she would have said, had she the strength to say it, and if she hadn't been so distracted by something else.

…Clink?

Kass turned away and looked at the jacket that had fallen onto the ground, confused. She had definitely heard something hit the wooden floor, either wood or… metallic. The jacket was torn to hell and back, though and didn't seem to have a zipper anymore. Sam hadn't noticed and neither had Mikaela. Both had gone back to glaring blankly at the wall or window in their own silent frustration.

"What was that noise?" Miles suddenly asked, causing the others to look at them. Apparently, he had heard it, too.

"It was the jacket," Kass said, not knowing she wanted to dismiss it as nothing, or…

Or…

For some reason, she crouched and grabbed the jacket up. It was nothing, just a jacket, but something in her gut told her to look closer. She didn't know why, or what she could possibly find—
Sam, short on nerves and temper, marched back over to her. "It's nothing," he said shortly, grabbing the jacket from her with a bit of force. It swung in the air as he turned. "Just probably the zipper part —"

Kass didn't have the keen eye of a mech, but even she couldn't miss a streak of silver and then the loud clatter of metal striking wood once again, this time louder without the constraint of fabric. She stood sharply, alarmed. Miles came up behind her, surprised, and even Sam stopped to look back down.

She didn't know what it was. It had skidded across the floor and ended up being stopped by a pile of laundry. It was silver, glittery. She had no idea what it was… but she knew what she hoped it was.

Sam had followed the object skid as well and seemed to have frozen in his place. "…What?" he whispered, eyes huge.

Kass stared downward, mouth agape.

"No… no… way.

"Is that…?" Mikaela began, moving slowly toward Sam, shaken.

Kass crouched again and reached forward with a trembling hand. She shuddered when her skin touched the rough, broken metal sliver, but she held onto it, standing. She held it out to the light, for the others to see, her eyes shining. It was so small, barely three inches in length, and felt like the most fragile of rocks.

"Is that a piece of the All Spark thing?" Miles asked, astonished. He remembered all the right words, when it counted most.

Mikaela shook her head in alarm. "N… no. That's… impossible," she said. "They… they put that in the base. The Decepticons stole it."

"This is another piece," Sam whispered, looking at the sliver with a mixture of utter shock—and building hope.

"How?" Kass asked, shaking even more now. She let him take it back and brought her hands to her chest, trying to warm them back up. All the blood in her body seemed to have left, she was so cold.

"My pocket… it… when I killed Megatron, maybe… maybe it fell into my pocket," Sam stuttered, cradling the piece like it were a piece of God. He started to smile. "He was leaning over me. Maybe… maybe that's how…"

Kass met his gaze, heart stopping for just a moment. "…We still have the All Spark," she said, not wanting to hear that it was true, because then, that would give them too much hope. What if they failed? What if… this wasn't enough?

What if it was?

Sam was smiling broadly now, excitement and utter relief etched into his face. "We do."

They had only one way to find out. "Bluestreak… BLUESTREAK!" Kass screamed, running for the window. She shoved the glass upwards in order to stick her head out. She saw the gray mech already transforming at the sound of her cry and he rushed to the window, disregarding the garden; human concerns could wait. "Blue!"
"What's wrong? Are you okay? Why are you screaming?" Bluestreak immediately asked, optics huge, roving over her form in concern. Bumblebee was transforming further away. "You're so pale! What happened?"

Kass motioned toward his helm, trying to keep calm. "C-call Lennox. Now. Right now," she said quickly, shivering still. "We need a full Autobot meeting ASAP. Keep it low-key, maybe not even Keller, but we need access to Optimus." The body was still lying in Hangar A.

Bluestreak looked confused as well as uncertain. "Why?" he asked, tilting his head, doorwings going upward just slightly.

Inhaling deeply, Kass dared to smile. "Blue… there's another shard."

End Chapter 39.

Chapter End Notes

It's not over yet, kiddies. Not by a long shot. But at least things aren't overly depressing (yet)?

A/Ns:
-Why, yes, there was a reason Sam survived. …Actually, if you want to be specific about it, it was because Sam's jacket survived. Ta-daaa~
-**Fallout Fun Fact**: I had actually not planned for this ornate 'sling-shot' subplot for the time travel… until I realized the science was all wrong, quite like Barns did in chapter 11. LOL. So thanks to science and my nerdyness, you got this round-about mayhem with sling-shot'ing through space. You're welcome.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Magic is pulled, but they realize they have to move their bolts in order to make this work. Various couples have a moment to reconcile. Happiness, in this story? Egad! Thank you, Shantastic!

Please note that next week there will be no update. I need to take a short break to catch up on chapters. ): Sorry for the inconvenience!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The drive back to the base was more a race than a safe ride. Once they had cleared the Tranquility city limits, traffic rules were ignored in favor of speed, other drivers passed without hesitation. Sam spent the majority of the trip sitting motionlessly in the front seat, his hands cupped around his battered Mission City jacket.

Cradled within its folds was a single piece of metal that had changed absolutely everything.

They had no guarantee that this would work. But they had hope. Hope that had driven them to call the base in a hysterical state, telling Lennox, and later Prowl and Jazz, of the new shard’s presence. Sam had no idea of how or if the shard would resurrect the long-dead Autobot leader, but Kass had been right: according to Optimus, there had been a possibility that the Shard could be used to resurrect Megatron, so with the recovery of another shard, they had the chance to use it on Optimus.

Lennox had demanded they get back to base ASAP. They had considered getting an airlift in, but Bumblebee had sworn he’d be faster. He and Bluestreak had nearly flown up the highway, passing other motorists in maneuvers that would have terrified Sam if he’d been capable of emotion at that moment. At one point he’d looked up at a comment from Mikaela to see the police on their tail, and then suddenly the cops had turned off their lights and sirens and fallen back.

"Prowl has contacted all road authorities between here and Plumas base," Bumblebee explained. His voice was all over the place as he too fought hysteria. "We can speed as much as we need to."

And they did. They flew over the roads. Sam barely felt it. He was hardly aware of Mikaela holding onto his arm. All he was aware of for two hours was the presence of the shard in his grasp.

This… had to work.

They reached the base in record time, and as they flashed past the first gate Sam realized that the
guards must have been waiting for them, because every gate was up. Bumblebee's engines revved loudly as they sped past the last one and onto the landing strip. Through the windshield, Sam could see mechs rushing about and soldiers pointing their way.

Bumblebee slid to a hasty stop and Sam followed Mikaela's lead in clumsily falling out of the seats onto the tarmac. The yellow scout wasted no time in transforming and behind them; Sam heard Miles and Kass move away so Bluestreak could also stand.

A shout dragged Sam's wild thoughts directly back to the situation at hand. He saw Lennox running their way.

"Sam!" the soldier called as he came up. Prowl was right behind him, doorwings flared upwards like Bluestreak's were. "Where is it?"

Sam almost fell as he tried to move toward the two commanders. "Here. It's here," he said, both legs shaking as he extended his hands and the jacket toward Lennox to take. "It was stuck on my jacket. I-I didn't know. It was there the whole time—!"

To his utter dismay and mixed relief, Lennox didn't take the Shard from him. Instead, the older human waved hurried at Sam to follow him as he turned back toward the hangars. "Come on, come on, to Hangar A. WJ and Ratchet are waiting."

Mikaela was just as jittery, leaving Miles and Kass behind with Bluestreak as she rushed after Sam. "Is this going to work?" she asked, glancing up at Prowl, who flanked them.

"Oh, Primus, I hope so," the tactician said, startling Sam with his open emotion. He had never seen Prowl so…anxious. It was well-deserved.

They ran across the tarmac. Everyone parted for them, even those who were already waiting in the suddenly emptied hangar. Boxes and crates had been pushed away from the make-shift tomb and Sam found himself staring at the prone corpse of Optimus Prime for the first time in weeks.

As Ratchet called for help lowering Optimus' platform, Sam stood in the center of the room, feeling utterly exposed. He looked around, heart racing a mile a minute, and took in familiar and unfamiliar faces. A giant white flier stood at the back of the room; an Autobot, but not one that Sam knew.

A surprising mech he saw was Vortex. The helicopter stood next to Jazz, being greeted by Thundercracker. The Seeker had rushed into the hangar just moments after Sam, along with Sideswipe, Hoist and Hound. Sideswipe loudly complaining about how he hated guard duty and was happy to leave Trailbreaker with Starscream. Everyone looked freaked. Sam heard loud breathing and realized it was him.

The weight in his hands grew heavier and heavier.

"I don't get it," Epps murmured, moving up next to Sam and Mikaela. "Bringing people back from the dead… with just a magic piece of metal…"

"This isn't magic," Vortex said, startling them all. He was staring at shard in the jacket intensely, as all the mechs were now. His green visor shone brightly. "This is God."

Sam could barely breathe as most of the room stared him down—or rather, stared at his hands. He couldn't keep his hands up much longer. It was like he had just stepped off a huge rollercoaster ride. His arms quaked.

Beside him, Mikaela let her hand touch his shoulder and it almost soothed him. It gave him the
chance to clear his head and look up, just as Prowl turned back from Optimus' body and fixed his gaze on the human.

"Sam, come here," the Praxian ordered, holding his hand out to beckon him closer.

Everything around them—the talking, the movement—ceased. Sam took a second to realize he had to move and he did so on unsteady legs. He walked past Mikaela and focused on getting to Prowl without falling over. It seemed like an impossible task.

"Here," Sam said, proud that he didn't stutter. He held his hands up as high as he could, offering the shard to the Autobot second in command. He would have handed it off to any mech at this point; they deserved to hold this, not him.

Prowl almost took a step forward, but stopped himself. He stared down at the human with his bright blue optics as his doorwings twitched. "No," he said in a voice that didn't quite sound like him.

Sam didn't immediately understand. "What?" Behind him, he heard mechs make hissing sounds of uncertainty as well.

There was a long moment, perhaps only a few seconds that felt like an eternity, but Prowl shook his helm. "You should do this," he said, the anxiety from earlier melting away into calm once more. He stepped aside and motioned for Sam to move forward to Ratchet and Optimus, alone.

Air caught in Sam's throat.

"Wh…what?" he asked. He didn't understand. "Why me?"

"I find it difficult to believe in simple luck, even in the course of recent revelations," the Autobot commander said, making no sense to Sam. Prowl inclined his helm again and spoke in a low voice, one of encouragement. "This is your duty. I am sure of it."

He didn't always understand the Autobots, or the Decepticons for that matter, when it came to their faith. They were robots, weren't they? But they had gods, and religious teachings, and philosophy. They didn't believe in things like fate though, or destiny, restrictive concepts that many humans thought they were better off believing than any religion. Optimus had always said humanity's fate would be better than that of the Cybertronians', but Sam had always thought he was speaking of humanity's end result. He'd never thought the mechs believed in personal destinies.

But as Sam looked around, he saw familiar faces that clearly agreed very seriously with this suggestion, he realized they believed it, too. Jazz, Ratchet, Ironhide, Bumblebee—

Sam didn't understand why. Why they picked him. What their reasoning was for that decision. Even after meeting sentient alien robots and becoming involved in their war, even after he'd killed Megatron, he'd never had an inkling that any of them believed this might be in the cards for Sam's own destiny. He was a boy from Nevada, a kid who never should have had a single thing to do with aliens, or saving the world.

But as he lowered his precious cargo away from his chest, Sam realized just what he was. He was a boy from Nevada—who was friends and foes with aliens—who had ultimately saved the world. Once, it turned out, was enough to mean something.

And for the first time in two and half years, Sam Witwicky accepted this.

He dropped the jacket in favor of holding the tiny sliver of silver in his palm. He tried not to clutch it too tightly, since it looked so fragile, but it was all he could do to keep from shaking. Ratchet
instructed everyone else to back away. He looked like he was ready to jump in at any time to inspect Optimus, if or when the shard worked. Sam held his breath as he approached the motionless body.

It felt like he was disconnected from the world when Ratchet offered his hand and Sam climbed on. The floor disappeared and he was suddenly face to face with Optimus Prime.

The months since his deactivation hadn't affected Optimus' frame much, though it was tinged an odd gray compared to the once vibrant red and blue. Sam could see the marks of battle and the injuries Ratchet had only barely patched. The Cybertronians didn't make-up their dead like some humans did; it was offensive to them. They left their dead in their final states to honor them as they had been, not to remember them how they'd wanted them to be.

Optimus had died a hero, a victim of murder. There was no use hiding that. Sam swallowed hard and tried not to feel anything when Ratchet gently tipped him forward to step directly onto that ruined chest.

It felt wrong to be there, but the tiny hope he had in his hands made it somehow less offensive. He knew every eye and optic was on him now. He wondered if there was a proper way to do this. Ratchet said nothing, backing away.

Sam looked down at his hand and slowly unclenched his fingers. The glimmer of silver gave him something to focus on besides the dead mech beneath him. Sound faded and it was like a tunnel had opened between him and the shard. Slowly, Sam turned his head downward and stared into Optimus' blank faceplates.

Limbs slowed by an surge of either fear or sheer delirium, Sam moved forward over the ruined sparkchamber and crouched gradually until his knees touched the cold, dead metal beneath.

He didn't know if this was the culmination of his destiny, or his purpose on Earth. Sam didn't know if every single moment he had ever experienced, every choice he had ever made, had led to this—

But he was there. And he was going to finish it.

"Optimus..." Sam whispered. He closed his eyes and gave the shard one last, desperate squeeze. "Please. Let me do this one thing."

He didn't know if anyone was listening, but he had hope. Opening his eyes, Sam lowered his hand and released the shard into the depths of the wound.

There wasn't a clink, or even the sound of the shard hitting metal. Sam barely had enough time to stand back when the entirety of Optimus' frame seized. Sam stumbled and fell just as a jolt of lightening shot out across the metal, dancing over the surface and shocking the human. The pain was nothing, but Sam found himself stunned and unable to move as his eyes fell again to the hole.

He wasn't the only one to gasp as that single little shard did almost the same thing they had witnessed the whole All Spark do years ago in Sector-7's secret base. The lightning was the only light, but the real spectacle was the metal. Lattices of metal wove and remade what was broken—all appearing from nowhere. Matter created without aid, metal born again from what couldn't be more than air and dead space—

Sam couldn't tear his eyes away as the gaping hole that had taken Optimus' life disappeared, as if it had never happened in the first place. The sound of creaking metal and the injury being fixed continued, echoing across the frame as internally, things were made right again.

But what if wasn't? Sam scrambled to his feet, heart pounding as he scoured the Prime's face for any
signs of life. There was nothing, though maybe the gray seemed lighter. He couldn't tell. Everything had moved so fast, he couldn't believe it was over. Where was the shard—was it—did it work?

None of the mechs approached. Sam could only hear his ragged breath again. What about his spark? Would this bring back his spark? What if it didn't? What if Optimus' body was fixed, but not his spark?

Shakily, Sam forced himself closer. He placed his foot on top of the spot where the injury had been and felt nothing but solid metal. He edged further and further up the massive chestplates until he was looking directly up at Optimus' face. There weren't any signs of life.

Beyond the face, Ratchet stirred. Sam didn't dare look at the medic. The human kept his eyes only on Optimus' dark gray optics. He waited. And waited.

Like tiny stars fighting against the blackness of a night sky, blue lights flickered.

Sam felt the world narrow down to only those two lights.

"Optimus?" he asked in a broken voice.

Blue optics, bright and alive, found him.

"Sam."

For the first time in his life, tears ran down his face and Sam didn't feel an ounce of shame.

0000

It seemed that much had changed, in a short amount of time. The feel of the Earth was the same beneath his tread, but the air was different. There was a different charge to it, generated by the people trying to affect change to benefit Earth, to save the human race, and by those who fought against them.

Through a seemingly whirlwind transformation in the loyalties of his lieutenants, Galvatron's location was now known, as were those of the drones. Logic seemed to indicate that the Decepticons would have immediately moved their shuttle to another site, but that did not change the fact that NEST and their allies knew, at long last, how to handle their enemies. The Fallen was still missing, but he was less important than his creations were.

From the perspective of the longer-lived Cybertronians, the war was far from over, and would likely continue on a level that the humans were just beginning to understand. The most recently known position of the Nemesis had been revealed by Soundwave, and NASA scientists were scouring the skies for any sign of the ship as it rushed to Earth. A brief visual forwarded from the distant Hyperion had showed the starship headed their way, and fast. This was not good, considering that the Hyperion herself was just inside this solar system, past the planet of Jupiter.

They had a moment of peace before the storm, as the human saying went. But he feared that moment would not last long. Prowl's best estimate was that they had a week or less before Nemesis made contact. Perhaps Galvatron would wait for the drones, or for the Fallen, but his insanity left little room to consider any logic to his actions. Most likely, he would attack soon, and would use everything he had.

Optimus stood on the edge of the airfield and gazed up at the setting sun, considering these things. He had faith they would be able to win.
Watching the mixed colors of the sky, Optimus was glad he had never had the chance to miss seeing it. Now that he was able to, despite not remembering the long months he had been lying dead, the Prime was grateful. He found it difficult to look away from the horizon.

Stepping up behind him, Prowl waited in patient silence. After being nearly pummeled by Ratchet in medical check-ups, crowded by an overwhelmed audience of mechs and humans alike, and simply trying to come to terms with his own death, Optimus was grateful for his quiet friend.

"What shall we do, Prime?" the tactician asked, gently breaking the Prime from his reverie.

That was the question to focus on now. Optimus considered it, taking in the sight of his stoic right hand carefully.

"You've been handling this well without me," he said, meaning it. Prowl and Ironhide had held their army together, even expanded it. Their forces were being well managed and their allies were actively working to provide them with launch locations around the globe. They had done extremely well.

Prowl frowned. "We could not win this war without you," he said gravely. "We knew this. At best it would have been a draw."

Optimus knew his tactician all too well; the mech had stood at Optimus' side ever since the fall of Praxus itself and had never failed in a mission or an order. More than that, Prowl had confidence in himself and their forces. To admit failure, or the potentiality of it, was a serious thing for Prowl.

"Regardless of if you did or not, I am here now," Optimus replied. He reached out and grasped his second's shoulder. "I thank you. And Sam."

"He has been courageous beyond what we could ever have expected," Prowl said quietly, doorwings lowering.

Optimus nodded. "We owe him everything. More than he or the humans will ever understand." He looked out at the skyline, oddly at peace with the notion he would have never seen it again until just a few hours previous.

The humans could never fully understand the reasons a Prime needed to exist. They were the sentinels of their species, the guardians of the Matrix, especially after the loss of Iacon's Hall of Records and their crippling exodus from Cybertron. Optimus had never seen a reason to burden Sam or any other of their organic friends with the complexity of his existence. It was enough that they knew he had once been Cybertron's ruler. That was well enough understood.

Prowl inclined his helm, clearly knowing just as much as Optimus did about all of those things.

"Yes," the Praxian agreed. He folded his hands, his gaze unfaltering, his loyalty always unquestionable. "How do you suggest we proceed, Optimus?"

They had a basic outline of what to do now. The drones would soon be rooted out and destroyed before they grew in number, but if a hive was missed, it could change the balance of power suddenly. They now had enough mechs to split up to support their various bases. Optimus had missed much, but now…

"We find Galvatron. We find the Fallen, and the drones under his control," he said, optics narrowing. "And we kill them."

The finality of those words would have alarmed him if this were back at the start of the war, when the young Prime had thought naively that this dispute would be settled in short time, and that the loss
of life caused by Megatron's rebellion would be minimal. Megavorns later, Optimus still cringed internally at the idea of all out violence, especially now that their race was so broken and few…

But the time for naivety and hope of a small fight was over. Now, Optimus could only focus on the end as being achieved through violence, whether they wanted it or not.

Prowl nodded and Optimus turned his optics back toward the fading sun.

*Your move, brother.*

0000

*Nemesis* was moving far quicker than NEST or the humans wanted. With Starscream's obvious defection to the Autobots having reached Galvatron's distorted processors, the Seeker's warnings of the lunatic's change of plans turned out to be true. The *Hyperion* was now within the solar system, but it would take them nearly a week to get to Earth. It would take *Nemesis* only three days.

It was odd; the information they had learned should have sent the Autobots and their allies into a wallowing sense of despair. Instead, with the return of their precious Prime, they seemed eager. Ready. They wanted this fight. Starscream sat back and let them prepare for the bloodbath. As long as it was not *his* life being thrust out there for Galvatron's swinging mace to end, he was fine with any sort of suicidal plans the Autobots made for themselves.

He gave them everything he had on *Nemesis* and who was on it. Cyclonus had taken over command after Starscream left the vessel, centuries ago. It was one of the most deadly and powerful ships left in either transformer army and Starscream knew it innately from his time commanding it. He knew its weaknesses, which he sold to the Autobots in order to get out of having that Pit-awful behemoth guarding him nonstop. Prowl was a firm negotiator, so Starscream knew to watch what demands he made.

Earth's forces mobilized. They prepared for imminent attack. Starscream couldn't access information channels openly now, but he knew it was the next step for the woefully underprepared planet. Even with the Autobots on Earth, they were outnumbered. *Nemesis* was full of fliers, who constantly proved to outmaneuver and overpower the humans.

With Prime leading the charge again… Starscream imagined the number disparity not mattering, at least not when it came to bolstering spirits. He sneered at his captors' stupidity. Prime alone could not save them, and yet they acted as if this had suddenly given them a new wind, a new force to use against Galvatron that would grant them victory.

It was either utterly foolish, or they knew how desperate they were and prepared for a final showdown on the planet they had made an irrational stake in. They should have just left the humans to their own devices years ago. Instead, Optimus had tied his peoples' fate intricately with the organics'.

He heard snippets of conversation here and there about how all of these things were so different from the alternative future the time travelers had come from. Starscream was only partially interested in that little drama. To him, it failed to matter now. This world was the one he knew and the one that would affect him. He did not care either way.

However… perhaps there was one part of the time travelers' situation that intrigued him. Or rather, one of the time travelers themselves.

Starscream said nothing when the brig door opened and a single mech came in. The weak lights over
head were momentarily blocked as the giant maneuvered around until he could slowly sit down opposite Starscream on the floor. The sudden intrusion did not worry the ex-aerial commander.

Optics glowing faintly, Skyfire peered back at the other flier.

"Starscream," the white shuttle said, ever calm.

Starscream stared back intensely. "Skyfire."

He had always been alone. There had been few mechs ever to somehow become important, in name or in the very rare case in person. There had been some, though. Only a handful. Time and war had rooted most of them out, as it had done with everything.

Thundercracker and Skywarp—the ones he had known, not that alien Thundercracker who apparently was with an Autobot grounder now, of all things—were dead. Skyfire had been dead to Starscream for so much longer. Seeing him alive after all these vorns… Starscream wasn't sure he was happy. It didn't make him feel much now, honestly.

Skyfire looked similar and yet very different. His armor was different and so were his optics, but the size and voice were the same. Quiet, collected, eternally distant—Skyfire had never developed close relationships with others. That was what had made Starscream so intent on involving the shuttle in his own life eons ago, when the war had been nothing more than a murmur in the streets. Skyfire had never paid Starscream's ego a klik of attention; in return, Starscream had let him have his silence. The two had given each other a balance neither had ever acknowledged, because they never had to.

*Better days*, Starscream thought, strangely numb.

"What will you do now?" Skyfire asked, breaking the quiet. His gentle voice had never seemed to fit his massive size.

Starscream shrugged. "If Prime keeps the promises you fools made… I do not know. I will not stay here, on this horrid world."

He thought of finding other Decepticon forces, those who had not heeded Megatron, nor responded to Galvatron's call. He could raise another army. It was possible.

For some odd reason, his answer made Skyfire smile. "You were not always so miserable," the shuttle said, voice faint. Only vorns of experience gave Starscream the optics to notice his smile at all. "What has happened to us, Starscream?"

That almost made Starscream laugh. He sneered. "War. Megatron," he said. He pointed cruelly at the shuttle, knowing his words would hurt. "You aren't an Autobot. You never were and never will be, no matter what color you change your optics to."

Because Skyfire was a coward, though in a different way than Starscream admitted he himself was. Because no matter what had happened between them, or what time this Skyfire was from, or what allegiance the shuttle now bowed to…

Starscream knew him best. Just as Skyfire knew him.

Skyfire stared at the other flier for a moment. "I know that," he said at length. He wasn't bitter. "It would seem only you and I understand this."

The Autobots trusted the shuttle, or at least, more than they trusted any Decepticons. Starscream didn't want to point out how foolish that was, just because watching the Autobots fail at self-
preservation was amusing. Skyfire was a traitor, but it seemed that for now, he would not betray them.

"Because I know you. I know everything about you," Starscream said. His smirk suddenly felt too heavy and he looked away to glare at the wall. "Or at least I did."

Skyfire made a sound; almost a laugh. The shuttle never laughed. "You do. You did," he said. "And I knew you, my old friend." When Starscream looked up to glare at the other mech, Skyfire's smile was sad. "Do not try to fight Prime when we win against Galvatron. You will gain nothing from war."

The initial reaction that bubbled in Starscream's spark was to deny this; he was Starscream and he could do anything he wished. Prime was a fool to let him live. When Galvatron was distracted, or dead, Starscream could escape. He would leave this world and its problems, and rebuild what he rightfully deserved.

*You will gain nothing from war.*

That reaction never came out. Starscream felt it die inside him, because this was not Galvatron mocking him, or an Autobot swearing to fight any and all attempts the Seeker would make for dominance.

This was Skyfire. Only now, only to this mech, would Starscream ever admit that this was true.

But he said nothing. He glared at the shuttle until Skyfire looked away to stare at the wall behind him. Starscream wanted to be angry. He wasn't just a survivor; he was a warrior. He had climbed to the top and the only one standing between him and total power had been Galvatron. He had, for a short time, tasted that unlimited power and knew it should belong to Starscream, lord of Vos.

And somewhere, under the exhilaration of power and lust for spilling energon, Starscream felt a sickness that threatened to choke him whenever he dared to think of things other than his army or his goals. When he thought of Skyfire, and what had been taken from them both by war and Megatron.

His friend felt that sickness, too. Only Skyfire had been consumed by it, and Starscream had tried to bury his.

"...I miss it," he said, daring to acknowledge that remaining fault.

Skyfire didn't startle. He turned his head back and met Starscream's gaze. "Miss what?" he asked.

Starscream dimmed his optics. "Vos."

Perhaps this war was over. It had been a long time coming. Starscream wondered, deep down, if he had ever actually expected to survive it. No one had, after the fall of Cybertron, he mused.

No one had ever expected to go home again. They wouldn't. Starscream was almost surprised he remembered enough of it to truly miss it as much as he did.

Skyfire held his gaze, and in the depths of the alien blue, grief betrayed his calm.

"As do I, Starscream," the shuttle said quietly. "As do I."

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It was an odd week. Being back on base was surreal enough, but Vortex had also been forced to deal
with Prime's unexpected resurrection as well as the realization that a single human had changed the course of the war beyond even what the time travelers had been expecting. He had been kept busy giving his reports to Prowl even after Optimus had risen and hadn't even been able to go see his friends until the following morning.

And then, of course, as his thoughts drifted from time travel to the oncoming war they'd be forced to fight all too soon, Vortex realized his trip back to Hangar B for a long awaited reunion with his friends would not go smoothly.

"Hey, fucker!"

Vortex looked up at the enraged howl, which was eerily familiar. "Wha—hey!" An egg splattered across his chestplates.

Half way between where he stood on the tarmac and the opening of Hangar B, stood Rachel Cooper, holding what appeared to be a carton of eggs.

For a horribly long second, Vortex actually felt afraid.

"You little SHIT!" Rachel all but screeched, grabbing another egg to throw directly at the helicopter. "I should egg the fuck out of your fucking face! Better yet, I'm going to find acid and drop it down your freaking exhaust pipe!"

Her throw sent the egg colliding with his shoulder, but he didn't move. Vortex stared at the human in silence, jaw dropped behind his mask. He just stood there and his silence only seemed to aggravate the human more.

"What? !" she demanded, practically howling as she lifted her arm again in a promise of violence.

Vortex stared blankly at her and retracted his mask. "Primus, I missed you," he blurted out before he had the sense to mute his vocalizer. Then again, with Rachel there in front of him after everything in the last few weeks… he didn't care if he was judged for this.

Of all the things he could have possibly said, that was probably one of the better choices. Rachel lowered her arm and seemed to gape up at Vortex with a mixture of emotions, but none of them seemed particularly volatile.

"Vortex…" she began, voice catching a variety of wavering tones. She looked lost, dropping the carton entirely onto the ground. "Fuck, man, I thought…"

Vortex felt guilty as he watched her struggle. He crouched and offered his hands in a submissive gesture she probably didn't recognize. He couldn't think of anything more to give her as proof of his desire for forgiveness.

"I couldn't have told you," he said, hoping she'd understand. "You would have gone after me. Or sent the others after me."

Her anger and sadness was entirely deserved. But to Vortex's surprise, Rachel's anger seemed to evaporate faster than it ever had before. The woman, bearing white bandages over many spots on her arms and her forehead, almost deflated as she took in the mech before her.

"…And they would have sent their army, which would have totally blown your cover," she said. She sounded drained as she closed her eyes. "I know. I…"

Vortex waited patiently as she collected herself. He wanted so badly to be able to embrace her. They
had nothing to share physically. As usual, they had to cope in silent frustration. Rachel opened her eyes and she glared up at him with shining eyes, though Vortex somehow knew the glare wasn't made in anger at him.

"I don't even get to be mad at you for this. For getting your ass in trouble," she said, frustrated. She took a hissing breath. "I did, too."

Oh, yes. THAT.

"What the frag possessed you to do that?" Vortex demanded, all of his own frustrations coming back instantly. He had been given the report from Jazz and had almost ignored Ratchet's orders for a medical evaluation to seek Rachel out, just to make sure she was actually all right and on base. She had almost died, had escaped a pack of drones all by herself in some crazy suit WJ had made—

"You," Rachel said, startling him. She looked away. "I mean… everyone. Goddard, Wheeljack, you… fuck, even Danny got prepped for battle." A tremor in her jaw betrayed her inner emotions. "And I was being a little bitch about lifting a finger."

Vortex shook his helm. "You were brave. You are brave," he said firmly, catching her attention. "You're a soldier, just like them. Just like the rest of us."

Rachel held his gaze with difficulty. "I know. I knew that, in my heart," she said, voice strained. She swallowed hard. "It just took me until now to man up and accept my responsibility. I almost got slagged, but I didn't. So it was worth it."

The finality in her voice didn't shake him as much as the words themselves. Vortex watched the human femme. He had noticed so many changes in their humans over the years, Rachel particularly. She had changed the most since the time they had met, when she had been just an angry little girl. Now she was a woman with that same temper.

But yet, behind the anger and raw aggression, suddenly Rachel had the sort of strength she had always mocked in the self-sacrificing natures of their Autobot friends.

"You grew up," Vortex said quietly.

"I didn't have a choice," Rachel replied in a hoarse voice. She met his gaze again and smiled, the gesture faint, but there. "But I'm glad."

A quiet fell over the tarmac, the sounds of soldiers and life fading away. Vortex felt peace for the first time in nearly two weeks, being there with her. It felt like nothing else mattered now, except right there, right then. Rachel collected herself, at least visibly. "I…" She rested her hand on his. He could feel her trembling. "I'm so glad you're okay."

Vortex wished he could take her hand. "I'm sorry," he said. He wasn't sorry for doing what he did to help them, but he was sorry he'd had to leave at all. It had been difficult for everyone. He understood that deeply.

"Don't do it again," Rachel said, trying to take on her usual authoritative voice. She glared at him challengingly. "If you have to leave, I'm going, too."

Agreeing to something like that was foolish. He couldn't see a reason for him having to disappear again, however. The battle for Earth was practically days away. There would be no undercover missions then. Just outright violence.
"Okay," he promised.

"Swear it," Rachel demanded, eyes bright.

Vortex nudged her hand up in lieu of being able to grip hers back. "I swear," he said, meaning it. He smirked. "So don't ride in any other 'copters besides me."

Finally, Rachel cracked a smile. She laughed and looked away briefly. "Okay." She looked back and her blue eyes met his green fiercely. "I swear I won't."

The most ill-matched couple on the planet reveled in their agreement. Vortex had no regrets. Not a single one.

It would take more than a ship to take this away, more than an armada. The entire Decepticon army could have descended upon the Earth right at that moment, and Vortex would never have felt better.

They were going to win.

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*Medical Bay*

One of the best things about having the *Hyperion* headed for Earth was the promise of a real medical wing. Ratchet had been incredibly happy about that, even though the threat of the *Hyperion* arriving after *Nemesis* overshadowed most of the benefits of having it on hand. If they weren't lucky, by the time the *Hyperion's* med-bay was available to them, they'd already have more wounded than they could transfer to the starship.

Arcee wasn't too worried about what was going to happen in the next few days. The long term had ceased to matter. Her focus was entirely trained on surviving day to day, or rather, the survival of a single person from day to day. She had requested leave from her duties in NEST and had received permission from Prowl in order to remain in the med-bay. When Vortex returned with his unexpected guests, and then when Prime had been resurrected, Arcee had been forced away, but when the chaos had calmed down somewhat, she found herself standing vigil like a stone statue directly next to the occupant in the medical berth.

Wildrider had improved. His spark chamber was finally responding to his self-repair prerogatives and he was on the mend. He had remained in stasis for days and each one had seemed incredibly long to Arcee. She found it difficult to stand and watch his motionless form, but staying away was even worse. She wanted to be there when he woke up, and miraculously, she was.

When the optics attached to the dark face flashed green, Arcee had rolled up close and waited with an anxious spark as the mech rebooted. She knew she should have comm'd for Ratchet, but everything felt frozen. She could only stand in silence.

Wildrider's optics remained on a buzzing dim level, but constant, which was the only sign he was conscious. Slowly, he moved his helm to the side and caught sight of her, standing there, shaking.

"Ar…cee?" the mech asked in a broken, distorted voice. He seemed confused as he looked at her and then beyond her at the med-bay.

Arcee edged closer, concerned. "Wildrider?"

An odd look crossed his optics. "Danny?" he asked, voice far stronger as he focused on the most important issue to him, more than his own health.
That made Arcee smile faintly. "She's okay. Better than you are."

It was that answer that gave Wildrider the chance to reflect on what he remembered already and he seemed to take a second to understand why he was in the Autobot med-bay. His optics never flared with fear, or concern for if it was safe. He trusted Arcee, clearly.

"You are an idiot," she said, finding the strength to finally reprimand the red-and-black mech.

Wildrider was still going through his own breakdown of events, clearly. "You found us?" he asked, turning his helm toward her again.

Arcee nodded tersely. "Thankfully you weren't that far from the road. Ratchet sensed you."

She never wanted to think about how close it had been. If they hadn't gotten there when they had, or if they hadn't been able to get Wildrider back to base in time to stabilize him... it had been way too close.

Wildrider seemed to be slowed down by his pain, or perhaps by disabled pain receptors overall, depending on what Ratchet had done for him. Arcee waited patiently for him to gather his thoughts to speak.

"Did I kill them all?" he asked. Ah, the next most important question.

"Yes," Arcee replied. She moved closer and stared down at the all-too-still mech. He must have been absolutely exhausted if he wasn't twitching at all or trying to sit up. "And you helped us to figure out how to kill the rest out there."

Without his and Danny's close-up experience with the drones, they might not have known about the builder drones at all. It had been an invaluable discovery, but Arcee could not help but feel it hadn't been worth it. Wildrider had almost lost his life.

"Ve vere not looking for them. Ve vere looking for Vortex," Wildrider said, optics not glowing nearly as brightly as they normally did. He strained to look past her and almost tried to sit up. "Danny is not in trouble? I am one who came up vith plan."

His concern for his friend was expected and Arcee smiled. "No, you're not in trouble, either of you," she assured him, pressing down on his uninjured shoulder to encourage him to lie back again completely. "In fact, even Ironhide has said you were very brave. You saved Danny's life and helped us to find out about the builder drones."

The mech was taken back by that statement. He looked to the side, clearly struggling to recall the details of the fight. Arcee watched him in silence, suddenly overcome by emotions she had just barely managed to battle down over the last few days.

"You were very brave, Wildrider," she said softly, meaning it.

Her admission made Wildrider refocus his attention on her. His gaze lacked his usual intensity, but he was trying to look closely at the femme. His reasons probably wouldn't make sense to anyone else, but Arcee endured it, because she knew it was something he did.

"...When you say it..." Wildrider said, almost smiling. "I believe it."

She had no idea what it was about this mech. The first time they had met, Arcee had almost attacked him. Progressively after that day, for many years, it had been an uphill battle to not just throw caution to the wind and silence his prattling. His arrogance. His insanity. He made her want to just...just…
strangle him, as the human saying went.

But then…

Somehow… that feeling had changed. She hadn't been sure what feeling replaced it when she endured the teasing, or received kindness from a mech she had only been cruel to, or on the best of days that she only mildly tolerated. Wildrider never returned her bitterness. He never treated her cruelly. He openly offered everything that he was to everyone he deemed worthwhile to protect.

He had been her friend for six years, and she hadn't wanted a single moment of it.

Arcee braced her spark. "I'm sorry."

Wildrider flinched and did his best to turn his head to look at her. He looked confused. "For what?" he asked.

The truth was difficult to admit. "For not…" Arcee began, struggling, "seeing that sooner."

For not seeing a lot of things, like Wildrider's bravery, or what he meant to her. He threw words around their entire group, like *gestalt, family* and *friends*. She had taken him to be insane, not someone capable of really understanding what those words meant.

But even after years of witnessing that he did understand, it hadn't been until he had almost been lost forever that she'd understood how much they all meant to Wildrider. It shamed her. It made her understand, though. And not just about Wildrider's feelings.

"It's my job to see things, isn't it?" Wildrider asked, surprising her. He smiled. The gesture was likely only weak because of his tiredness. "Ve all have jobs, in gestalt."

Arcee felt a portion of her remaining discomfort disappear as she took in his words. "Yes."

They did have their roles. Arcee would always be a soldier, and she had expected to only be an Autobot soldier. But she had other loyalties now. She had fought them fiercely, but in the end, Arcee was no traitor. Her loyalty defined her. This… defined her. Just like it did Wildrider.

Looking at the mech fondly, Arcee finally grasped how much they had in common. It was humbling.

Wildrider glanced around the med-bay and seemed disgruntled by the fact he knew he couldn't get up to leave. Arcee would have comm'd Ratchet to keep him there if he had tried to leave, but for now, he seemed to realize he was stuck.

"Vhat next?" he asked, clearly exhausted.

Arcee folded her hands. "*Nemesis* is coming to Earth. The *Hyperion* is close, but we'll have to hold the incoming forces off ourselves for awhile," she replied. "For now, we have time to rest."

The warrior in both of them shared a similar unease at being forced to rest while a battle loomed ahead of them. Wildrider huffed and glared at the ceiling in silence. Arcee was reluctantly pleased they still had a few days to truly rest. She didn't like the wait any more than the rest of their friends did, considering they had never waited for the drones in their own world, but at least with the pause, Wildrider could rest up more. He wouldn't be ready for the fight, but Arcee could only stare at his injuries and alien stillness and feel…grateful. She didn't know why. But she was.

The mech on the berth had spent most of his energy for the day, it seemed, but Wildrider didn't immediately drift off. He lifted his optics and found her face. A questioning look flickered over his
faceplates. Arcee stared back uncertainly.

"Vhy so sad, femme?" he asked quietly, his optics dimmer.

Answers choked in her vocalizer. She didn't know what to say at first, but his question made her realize that her internal thoughts were showing on her face. She tried to smile reassuringly, knowing the gesture was weak.

"I'm not sad. I'm happy," Arcee replied. She steadied herself. "I am... very happy."

Every day, for the rest of her life, no matter if she outlasted the war or not, she would live with pain. She could never fix what was broken and she had accepted this. But she was not alone.

She was not alone.

Wildrider stared at her, searching her face with the same intensity as always.

"I've never heard you say that," he said. A faint smirk appeared in his faceplates, which was a relief in and of itself. "Good."

If they won, or lost, Arcee didn't care now. She held onto the happiness she finally allowed herself to have. She would remember it, when the days grew darker, and if they did lose, it would be the last thing she would think of. She would make sure of it.

Gently, she laid her hand in his and squeezed. He squeezed back.

She would remember this.

End Chapter 40.

Chapter End Notes

Next, the Autobots realize they have a very-much-unwanted stalker, but then Jazz decides to rename the chapter: "The Chapter That Should Have Happened An Entire Book Ago." (Danny will be pleased.)
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Battle plans are made and then, hey, Jazz stops being a baby. :) Thank you, Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, original characters, and kind of sexy time?

Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Plumas Base Communications Center

"We have a problem, Commander."

It was Mirage who spoke from his seat in front of the secondary console, where he was monitoring transmissions from his operatives. On the telecommunications screen, Simmons had been reporting on the recent arrival of Ironhide and his squad at the Diego Garcia base. At the main console, Jazz and WJ were assisting Prowl with decoding the most recent messages they had received from the Hyperion concerning tactics, timing and deployment of personnel. Prowl had not looked up when Sunstreaker had arrived to help with the decoding, but Mirage's brisk British tone demanded attention.

"Report," the Autobot SIC ordered, finally looking up from the console.

"Ops-level transmission. The Galaxus was not hit by asteroids," Mirage replied, blunt. "They were hit by a mech."

Prowl literally dropped his datapad, thankfully onto the table, as he turned around properly to stare at the other mech. "What?"

This was startling for a wide variety of reasons. It had been a blow to learn that the Galaxus' would not be able to support their offensive, but nothing in their most recent communications had indicated the situation was anything but routine. Prowl knew that Mirage had been handling the data from Galaxus, and given the mech's efficiency in his role as the head of Special Ops, he would have expected any discrepancy to be noticed sooner.

Then again, Prowl thought, it had been quite the hectic week.

"They took damage in the middle of an asteroid field, but they did not realize it was just a cover," Mirage answered. He sat patiently as Sunstreaker made a snarling sound and even WJ seemed incredulous. Epps and Lennox were also gawking from the catwalk. "Someone literally blew a hole in their ship and they did not realize it until later."

Prowl didn't have to use advanced logic or calculations to realize just how ludicrous that was. "That is… impossible. How did they miss such an attack?" he asked.
Mirage's frown deepened. "All witnesses were killed. The science crew was the target," he said. He sent Prowl a copy of the decoded message. "Perceptor's crew. We only know the truth because they managed to find a single security feed that had not been destroyed in the attack. Once they realized an attack had occurred, they found some additional external feeds."

Perceptor and his science team were dead, then. Killed in a calculated attack. Prowl went over the data thoroughly, though it was just a brief message. The first footage to be retrieved had apparently shown a large, solitary mech moving through the *Galaxus*' science division, obliterating the equipment and two mechs before disappearing out of range of the camera. A second feed had shown the mech quietly exiting the ship, nearly invisible against the dark of the surrounding space. A series of impacts rocked the ship, and after a moment the mech disappeared completely.

It was eerily familiar.

WJ hesitated. "...Oh, dear," he said tightly. His distress was shared by all of them. This was a devastating loss; for some, it was personal.

"Why would the Fallen attack your scientists?" Epps asked. The humans were all watching the mechs with interest.

Sunstreaker glared. "Do you even have to ask? After everything else that's happened?"

Prowl shot the frontliner a reprimanding look. Sunstreaker growled and said nothing more to the startled humans. He had put aside the idea of talking to the twins about their antagonistic attitudes toward the survivors; their behavior had improved after Wildrider and Danny had discovered the hive near the base. Perhaps they did need some sensitivity training to deal more appropriately with the humans.

"He was working on the gamma ray situation, which WJ has shown would have eventually led him to the drones," Mirage offered instead. He shook his head slowly. "He might not have even realized what he had discovered, but someone else could have, if they had picked up on his transmissions headed to WJ here."

"And the mech..." Lennox looked uneasy. "It was the Fallen?"

"Who else could have space-ready technology plus tear a hole out of a *star cruiser* and then teleport away?" Sunstreaker demanded harshly. Prowl scowled; yes, sensitivity training it was, then.

Epps ran a hand over his smooth head. "Shit, shit, shit."

"What does this mean?" Lennox demanded, eyes wide with alarm, as he looked back to Prowl. The tactician almost wanted to say he didn't know; that would have been a kinder response.

"It means that even without the drones in perfect condition, the Fallen knows we are on to him, and now he has entered the fray himself," Mirage answered. His gaunt face was even grimmer now.

"Fuck," Jazz added eloquently. He glanced over at the command console and their meager science team. "WJ, let's decrypt that message ASAP an' see what Perceptor had. Maybe he did find somethin' worth killin' 'im over."

With a deep sigh, WJ clearly forced his grief for his friend aside, turning back to the console. "Good idea."

"Again I am confused," Prowl murmured. He could not understand the reasoning behind the Decepticons' actions now. None of his calculations, none of his logical reasoning made sense here.
"Why not take out the entire ship's crew? Why only disable us?"

Without much warning, the human he had the least patience for, like many, spoke up. And for once, it was not in an aggravating way.

"They want you alive," Simmons announced, and most of the optics and eyes turned to his image on the screen.

Prowl frowned. "What?"

Simmons, for all of his undesirable qualities, knew how awful minds worked. He boasted that he knew how politics worked inside and out of his own American government system, and his experience had, oddly enough, given him the insight needed to anticipate the actions of the Decepticons. Even Ironhide had to acknowledge the fact that Simmons understood what many of them did not, and often pointed out the worst in a situation to make a grudgingly valid point. Today, this appeared to be true as he eagerly took in their entire conversation.

"The Decepticons don't want any of us here, do they? No humans, no Autobots, but they aren't in charge anymore, are they?" the ex-Sector-7 agent asked, leaning in closer to the webcam than necessary. "This Fallen guy has new rules and he's got the cojones to enforce them. That's what's got Galvatron playing nice."

"But why keep your enemies alive?" Epps asked, baffled. No one seemed to know the answer to that.

"The point of all of this isn't to obliterate us. Even you grunts know the Decepticons want Earth for the resources," Simmons replied, pointing downwards with his finger. "Maybe that's what the Fallen wants too. Wants to keep everything just the way it is, only under his little finger when he finally does show up. Wiping out our leaders is the point here, to make us weak, but not utterly break us."

"Because every empire needs a workforce," Jazz added. He glanced over at the Autobot SIC with a grim expression. "It's as good a theory as any, Prowl."

Prowl wasn't sure he agreed. The idea of the Fallen, or even Galvatron alone, planning so specifically to use the remaining Autobot forces for their mining needs seemed illogical. Having too many of their enemies left alive was dangerous. Any rational strategist would see that.

But the Fallen was like nothing they had ever seen before. The idea of him realizing something beneficial about keeping the Autobots mostly intact was not impossible.

"His plans have shaped everything that has happened so far. They have been shaping events for both sides longer than we have even known his name," Prowl began, focusing on a spot on the wall as he considered these facts. "I very much would like to figure this out before we become acquainted with him personally."

Irrationally, he felt a surge of anger. He did want to meet the Fallen, and soon. That mech had much, much to answer for.

"Well, when he gets here, I guess we'll just have to get the truth right from the mech himself," Sunstreaker said, engines snarling. Everyone seemed to share that sentiment.

Lennox hung on the railing, tired. "But how are we supposed to find him? He can teleport through space. He could be literally anywhere in a split second."

That was another major roadblock, but Prowl was accounting for each one as they encountered
them. There was the threat of having a Decepticon gestalt team headed their way (Starscream had warned that the Constructicons were stationed on Nemesis), the threat of an assault directly from the atmosphere down onto the Earth, unleashing havoc on several heavily populated areas at the same time; now they had the presence of the Fallen as a direct combatant and several other dangers. The most difficult part was deciding which one was the most important to focus on.

"Then we focus on th' drones," Jazz said. He shrugged. "It's our best option."

"No."

Prowl turned around as everyone stared at him in surprise. He held his head high and stared back. Jazz stared at the SIC in confusion.

"What? That's th' best plan we got," the saboteur said. Even Sunstreaker seemed to agree with that; their confusion was mutual.

"No. It is a means to an ends, but not the whole picture," Prowl replied. He inclined his helm. "With Nemesis arriving, we must split our forces up to deal with the Decepticons as well as the drones. However, the drones will play their part."

This was an odd tactical situation. The last time Prowl had had to worry about settling forces over the circumference of an entire populated planet had been back before the majority of Cybertron's cities had fallen. They were not fighting mechs here either; the drones were a different sort of enemy, both easier and more difficult to fight than ordinary Decepticons. Prowl had spent many days considering their options and deciding upon the best course of action.

He wasn't sure if this would guarantee them success, but at this rate, he rationalized, it would get them the most results.

"We use the drones against their master," he explained carefully. He eyed Lennox and Epps specifically. "We have no idea where the Fallen is, or how much power he has over the drones, but without him, we can be certain they won't have a benefactor anymore."

Through the theories the future refugees had brought with them courtesy of their Wheeljack and the newly acquired data on the hive-like mentality of the worker drones, WJ had suggested that without the Fallen to direct them, the drones might never achieve their full purpose. For all they knew, without him, they could cease to function. They were an attractive lure to use to drag the odd mech out into the open, just to test these theories.

Epps and Lennox exchanged quick looks. "...And we use the drones to get him, how?" Epps asked.

Prowl crossed his arms. "They're his ultimate weapon, his pet project. Perceptor had been making head way with the gamma rays. The Fallen must have detected his transmissions, or been told of them somehow, and reacted to keep us from learning about how and where the drones were teleported to Earth. They are his secret advantage, but they are also his weakest link." He glanced around at his listeners. "If they are destroyed before they become truly self-replicating, then he will have to cede the Earth to us," Prowl paused. "When we target them openly, in bold defiance, he will realize that his secret is out, that we know his plans. He will have to act quickly to regain control of the situation. He will come out of hiding to confront us, just as he did to the Galaxus."

It was a bold plan and would endanger many lives should the Fallen actually show up. But Prowl knew the time to passively await Decepticon action was over. The Autobots and NEST needed to take the offensive now, even as the shadow of Nemesis was nearly upon them.
"And if he doesn't show?" Simmons challenged, moving far too close to the screen with an arched eyebrow.

"Then we're still killing the drones," Prowl replied calmly. "We prepare for the worst, regardless. If the Fallen arrives, it will most likely take a combined effort of all available forces to bring him down."

No one could deny that. Simmons nodded and began to ramble about how international relations (under his guidance) were improving considerably, so the movement of mechs to their various bases around the globe could commence in the next forty-eight hours.

Beside him, Jazz turned back to the console, helping WJ with decoding the most recent transmissions from the science team. Prowl turned back to his own work, but as he retrieved his fallen datapad, something caught his attention in the decryption program. An alert had popped up… it had found one of the flagged topics of interests they had been searching for. Prowl was stunned when he read it through and realized what new information he had just been given.

This was their only shot.

This…

Prowl shuddered, and immediately constructed a brief outline of action.

"Jazz."

Jazz looked up and nodded. "Yo."

Slowly, Prowl turned his helm and stared down at the other mech, considering.

This…

This was a dangerous plan. A suicidal one. If he had any choice in the matter, Prowl never would have used it with any of his soldiers, let alone with Jazz. But he didn't have a choice.

"I need you to do something," he said. Shoving his nervous affection aside, Prowl focused on being the commander their army needed, now when they needed it most.

Jazz nodded vaguely. "Sure. What's up?"

Wordlessly, Prowl sent Jazz a file full of the data he had decrypted from Starscream's intelligence packets, plus an outline of one of the most insane plans he had ever developed. They'd have time to fine tune it, but the plan only had a thirty-percent success rate. And that was with generous rounding. Even with several days of meticulous editing, the odds would likely still be stacked against them.

He watched as Jazz accepted the files, could tell by the slight stiffening of his posture when he started his own analysis of the plan. Jazz pushed back from the console, and leaning back in his seat he stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. After several moments of consideration, Jazz sat up and turned to look straight at Prowl. The expression on his face revealed how unhappy the saboteur was with the plan, the success rate, but he was still willing to listen.

"Can you do that for me?" Prowl asked, knowing Jazz knew how dangerous the request was. It didn't matter, though; Jazz knew the risk was greater if they failed to take action.

"I'll do it," Jazz said, nodding. "You just line up th' pieces."
Prowl inclined his helm. "Of course."

"What are our chances, Prowl?" Jazz asked quietly. There was no fear in his voice; he mirrored Prowl's calm.

"Better than they've ever been," the tactician replied. He glanced to the side and motioned at their Special Ops commander standing by. "Mirage, let us get the Galaxus' report to Optimus."

Merely being able to say that made their bleak horizon far, far brighter. Prowl had faith.

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It was a rare sight indeed as of late; all of them were there, well, except for poor Wildrider. He was going through physical rehabilitation with Hoist and wouldn't be able to leave the med-bay for at least a week. Danny wished he could be in their camp with them, but she was just grateful he was alive. Kass was still in the med-bay, but would be joining them a little bit later. Right now the camp just held the eight of them: Thundercracker, Jazz, Danny, Barns, Bluestreak, Arcee, Rachel and Vortex.

For the first time since their abrupt awakening in this new world, since losing Wheeljack, Danny felt like all the pieces were back together, the world made sense. She looked around their messy little circle and felt relieved to see the faces that evening which stared back. Even if their choice of conversation had turned to more upsetting avenues… like war.

Jazz and Thundercracker had explained that all of their mechs would be assisting where they were needed, with the exception of Wildrider. Jazz and TC would be on call for any NEST mission, but Arcee was definitely stationed at the NEST base, along with Bumblebee and some of the other Autobots, to act as backup as well as guards for the civilians on base and to maintain a hub of communications if necessary.

"I'm going in, too. Me and 'Tex are going south, with any South American teams they need to find drone nests there," Rachel announced. She was sitting comfortably on Vortex's leg and shrugged at her friends' startled expressions. "Most likely gonna die of sunburn before we even see a drone, but yeah." Vortex shook his head, bemused.

Jazz looked stricken. "Oh, Primus, I was hopin' ya'd had enough adventure," he said, sharing a grimace with Thundercracker. They were dealing with it better than they had the first time Rachel announced she was going into a fight, but Danny shared their worry.

"Hell no," Rachel replied, snorting. She sent her guardians a wry look. "I don't want to go, believe me, but I am."

"What is it with you an' givin' me spark-attacks?" Jazz complained. He fell back against Thundercracker and grasped his chestplates dramatically. "I thought we were done with those after ya turned eighteen."

"You clearly don't know me, then," Rachel shot back, even though she laughed when she said it. "Everyone's putting in for this. We're all going to see danger."

She was right. Danny glanced around at her friends and felt uneasy when she realized Bluestreak was most likely headed off to fight, too. Barns was already assigned to go wherever Lennox's team went, to help them read through the drone maps better. At least he had a noncombatant role…

Danny rubbed her injured hand. "My wrist is getting better. Do you think I'll be able to go too?" she asked, knowing it was hopeless. She just wanted to help.
The mechs exchanged a quick glance. "You don't have any real weapons training, Danny," Thundercracker replied. He tilted his helm though, considering. "But maybe you could help some of the drone teams as a guide."

"To help find them?" Danny asked, surprised.

Jazz grinned. "An' t' show our guys where t' shoot, not t' mention where t' look fer th' builders," he said. Suddenly, he looked up and beamed. "Oh, hey, Kass. Ya heard everything so far?"

Every head or helm turned in surprise; Danny was surprised to see Kass standing several yards behind them. No one had noticed her walk up. Danny went to wave and greet her friend, but…

Kass was standing there, looking very pale, and didn't speak at first. She looked around at them and Danny realized something was wrong. There was fear in Kass' eyes, but more pronounced was resignation. That was not a good combination.

"I'm going to Kandahar," she said breathlessly.

At first, no one spoke or moved. Danny was speechless and wasn't sure exactly how to react. Kandahar was the NEST base in Afghanistan. That… that wasn't…

"Oh, Danny realized shrilly.

"Whoa, what? !" Rachel exclaimed, recovering faster than the others, and that sent everyone else off, clamoring in a panic and disbelief. Danny was horrified. Why was Kass going halfway across the world? ! She wasn't a soldier, either!

Face grim, Kass held her hands up to make them stop demanding answers from her. "Ratchet is going to China with Ironhide's team. Mikaela's going to be staying here for any American support, but we're expecting to need backup over in the Middle East," she explained. "I'm more experienced than Mikaela is, so I volunteered."

All of that hit them at once and Danny knew she wasn't the only one left with her mind spinning. She stared at her friend, unable to communicate the feelings she had about this. It didn't seem fair. It didn't seem…possible.

"…Holy shit," Rachel said quietly, eyes wide. She was staring at her best friend, at a loss just like the rest of them.

Bluestreak, of course, was immediately panic-stricken. "Kass… that's…" he began, vocalizer hissing. He sounded desperate. "But I'm not going there! I should go with you! Prowl wants me with Optimus' squad because I'm the only sniper they have on-planet, but this isn't fair!"

"Blue, everyone has their place, everyone has a part to play," Kass said, trying to be soothing. "Prowl and Optimus are putting us where we should go, not necessarily where we want to go." She smiled, the gesture honest but strained. "I'm happy to go. I'm… proud to be able to help."

That was understandable. Danny wanted nothing more than for her friend to stay with them, or at least, closer than over the ocean… but they had to help when and how they could. They couldn't afford to be selfish now.

That didn't make this any easier to digest. Everyone fell silent and was either gawking at Kass or staring at the floor in uncertainty. It was a painful moment to get past.

"…We really are splitting up, aren't we?" Danny asked, her voice faint. She stared up at her friends
It wasn't permanent, hopefully, but the separation would be the worst they had ever experienced. Their group had survived this entire time by working together as a team. Now… being thousands of miles apart… it was a little too much.

"Yeah," Kass replied, eyes sad.

Jazz suddenly leaned forward. "But not forever," he said. He smiled in a way that wasn't his usual deflective grin; this one seemed like it came from a deeper emotion. "We're goin' to help with th' initial contact and then get back here t' exchange battle stories." He looked around their group, his visor glowing softly. "Because we're soldiers. All of us. We're survivors an' I am proud of every single one of you."

Thundercracker rumbled lowly, nodding his head. Danny saw her friends take this to heart; Rachel held her head higher with newfound courage. Vortex and Arcee exchanged glances and seemed to agree with the sentiment. Kass patted Bluestreak's leg and the Praxian's doorwings lifted a little, his frown less grim. Danny smiled over at Barns and he returned the gesture.

They were soldiers, and they were going to fight this war. And if Danny had anything to say on the matter, they were going to win, too. It was one of the few facts they could focus on and it helped lift their spirits.

"I wonder what Goddard would say about this," Arcee said, surprising them.

Barns laughed. "He'd be jealous," he replied, smiling fondly. "He would probably want Optimus to name him general or something, just to get in the frontlines."

That earned a group-wide laugh. "Poor 'Rider, though," Jazz lamented, shaking his head. "He's furious he can't go with any of us, no matter where we go."

"He needs to heal," Arcee replied. She sat down on the ground and seemed far more at peace with the situation than before. That helped the others to calm down, too, just to see one of their own relax. "This will probably be just the opening battle, one that starts a whole new war. We will all have multiple chances to join the fight later, I'm sure."

There was another lull. The laughter faded into something more serious. Danny bit the inside of her cheek and tried not to fidget as her friends exchanged looks again.

Kass clutched her hands together and looked up at the others. "I'm… scared," she admitted.

There was a pause. "Me, too," Rachel said, quietly. "And that's okay."

Somehow, it was okay. Danny was scared, and she knew her friends were, too. They had every reason to be afraid of the future. But they also had so many reasons to be brave, too.

They got ready for bed, leaving a small lantern on in the center of their little encampment. Danny scooted her sleeping bag to her usual place next to Barns as Thundercracker and Jazz stepped away, giving Vortex room to lie down. Rachel curled up on his arm with a pillow and blanket. Kass did likewise with Bluestreak, forsaking the cots at least for tonight. Arcee transformed and rolled up close to Danny and Barns' beds.

Getting used to the dim lights, Danny found herself listening to her friends' movements as they settled in. The silence was comfortable, but there was something missing. Probably Wildrider. Or just conversation. They had spent too many nights lately silently trying to sleep instead of talking things
"Dibs on Galvatron's head," Rachel suddenly said, breaking into that silence.

Instantly, that sent Bluestreak into a nervous giggle fit and Vortex yelling, "No way!" Barns and Danny both laughed.

"That's grotesque," Kass complained, her disgust barely masking her own amusement. Arcee just sighed loudly. If he had been there, Wildrider probably would have been cackling madly.

"As if you could take Galvatron down," Barns chided.

Rachel glared at him from the crook of Vortex's arm. "Shut up, I can fight him better than you can," she shot back.

"Which is irrelevant, because I'm gonna be the one to kill the fragger," Vortex butted in. Both Rachel and Barns made disparaging noises while the others laughed.

They quieted down again, into a more companionable silence. Danny could hear her human friends breathing, and the mechanical whirling underneath the armor of her mech friends was just as soothing. She realized they hadn't enjoyed this peaceful togetherness in months.

"Hey, guys?" Danny began.

Optics and eyes went to her. "Yeah?" Vortex asked.

"I missed this," Danny replied. She smiled, thinking back over the years they had had together. "Talking with each other before bed."

It made her think of better days, which were ironically enough their worst days too. When food was scarce and every night they went to sleep thinking that they might never wake up.

But those were the nights when they could go to sleep surrounded by friends, feeling the safest they could ever be. Conversations by firelight, stories shared, songs sung quietly to drift off to—those were the nights worth remembering.

"I've missed this, too," Kass admitted. The others made other noises of agreement.

Barns shifted slightly next to Danny. "It gives us something to come back to," he said.

Danny smiled to herself. "Right," she said, sliding her hand into Barns'. It was the perfect reason.

And then, Bluestreak spoke up, asking a question that made everyone pause:

"Hey… where did Jazz and TC go?"

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Outside

Slipping away from their crew had been the easy part; getting out from under NEST watch was harder. But Jazz was still Special Ops. He knew how to dodge cameras and get under security nets, though dragging a thirty-foot-plus tall jet along with him made it challenging. By the time they’d reached the edge of the airfield and could break out into the woods, Jazz was laughing quietly, enjoying the mere thrill of this adventure greatly. When the truth came out, he was pretty sure Ironhide would short some circuits.
Thundercracker wasn't laughing, but Jazz could feel his amusement as they ran. Thundercracker had to duck branches, but they were surprisingly quiet as they went through the foliage. Decades of European forests had trained them to be as quiet as the wind itself. They rolled with the branches, under the remaining vestiges of plant life as winter approached, and their feet barely touched the dirt below. It made them feel human.

After what felt like hours, they stumbled to a stop. There was just enough room between the trees for Thundercracker to turn and stare down at Jazz, who found it difficult to look anywhere but at the Seeker. There was a lull, with only the wind filling the gaps. Jazz stared into Thundercracker's optics and felt emotion finally catch up to his hysterical mind.

Two nights ago, after so many wonderful things had landed in their laps—the return of both Rachel and Vortex, the reveal of the scientists at long last, and the resurrection of Prime—Jazz had been struck by the obvious next choice of action.

"I want to bond with you," he said, again, staring fearlessly up into Thundercracker's face, the green optics the only source of light on the shadowed faceplates.

He thought back over the entire length of time they had been together. He thought about Georgia, about France, about making the decision to love the jet after what felt like ages of denial that had threatened to drive him crazy. He remembered how cruel he had been when he had refused Thundercracker's request to bond; certainly there was logic in avoiding a bond because of the risk it promised should one of them be killed, but Jazz had been cowardly about it for the wrong reasons.

Jazz knew Thundercracker, and the Seeker knew him. They didn't need a bond to know one another, but there were other reasons to connect their sparks, just as there had been reasons to refuse.

These could very well be their last few days and nights alive. Jazz wasn't a fool. They were going to be sent overseas, just like the others. They were going to face off against 'Cons or drones, or perhaps even the Fallen himself, and every single person in NEST knew that there was a large chance they wouldn't come back alive.

And so, Jazz knew the risks didn't matter anymore. He took in the sight of the blue jet and remembered the journey they had both taken, together. Raised a child. Survived death countless times. Made a family out of the dust and misery an apocalypse had left them with. For the first time in their lives, they had a million reasons to make the bond real—

Because there was absolutely no reason in the whole wide universe to say no, not now.

"Are you sure?" Thundercracker asked, visibly tense. It was clear that the jet wanted this bad, that he felt like he always had.

"Yes," Jazz replied. "More than anythin' in my fraggin' life." He closed the distance between them and gently placed his hands on Thundercracker's chest. He grinned upwards. "Take th' lead, mech, you're th' experienced one."

They had spark merged before, but this was different. It was perfectly, insanely different. Thundercracker nodded and led Jazz downward; the jet lay back on the ground, letting the smaller grounder lie on his chest, their optics never once drifting from each other. Everything around them had ceased to matter entirely.

It was actually happening, Jazz thought shrilly, more shocked than afraid at that point. He let Thundercracker make the first moves, watching as the jet carefully retracted his chestplates. Jazz did the same and felt the cold winter air blow against his sparkchamber.
The mechanics were the same as any other spark merge. Jazz tried to focus on the sameness to get through the motions without messing up. He wasn't sure what there was to mess up, but he didn't trust the nervous twitching of his limbs.

He had always wondered what a spark needed to make a bond. Protocols? Commands? It seemed too unnatural to do it that way, and he was right. It wasn't a matter of flicking a switch, or having a medic initiate some sort of code. It was...deeper than that.

Whirling softly, their plating continued to retract, leaving the chambers pressed forward. With a click of his own armor, Jazz barely remembered sending the command to retract the final protective cover of his sparkchamber. The glow of their sparks sent shadows dancing over the spots where their armor plating touched. Jazz could see Thundercracker's spark—with a massive protective shell around it that was clearly part of his Seeker design—and marveled at the golden light, which reminded him of a flickering flame. It didn't matter how many times he saw it; it was beyond beautiful.

Jazz lowered himself down and his spark shuddered at the alien sensation of another mech's spark as the light from Thundercracker's spark jolted upwards in reaction to his presence. Tendrils of light—of life as they knew it—stretched across the meager distance and Jazz felt the tug of something drag him far, far away from the world. The connection was its own frame of existence, one created, maintained, and shared between two sparks alone.

Everywhere was Thundercracker, and echoes of himself. Jazz felt his helm tip and rest against Thundercracker's chestplates, but the rest of him was immersed in chaos. Somehow, it all felt like home. More than that, it was so very different than anything before.

::I can feel you::, he said, amazed.

Not like in interfacing, or even during a regular merge. He could feel everything that Thundercracker was, inside his mind, inside his spark. There were no firewalls, no blocks. There was nothing but pureness of identity and soul. Was this because they had wanted to bond? Their sparks just—knew?

::Yes::, Thundercracker replied, his voice echoing loudly, and yet nothing more than a caressing whisper. ::No secrets here::.

That should have terrified Jazz, but in the middle of this, in the middle of being connected, it didn't. It was a resolute thing. It grounded him.

He was swamped by so many feelings in Thundercracker's spark. He saw the undying loyalty to their family, their friends—to Jazz himself. He could also sense the echoes of the affection Thundercracker was receiving from his own spark. Jazz could feel Thundercracker's relief and quiet pride in receiving that love and Jazz felt himself grinning, enjoying his lover's joy—

And then, like a slap to the face, he found something he hadn't expected, at all.

::You like Prowl?:: Jazz asked, processors flailing, confused at finding that particular emotion inside Thundercracker. When? How? He could feel affection for the other grounder that didn't originate from him.

Thundercracker dragged them back to solid ground, oddly at peace. ::You love him::, he replied.

Irrational panic surged. ::I love you::, Jazz said, voice rising and falling out of place, his spark reeling with terror, denial, acceptance, and the unexpected realization that Thundercracker was right.

He did love Prowl.
But it wasn’t anywhere near as deep as the love he had for Thundercracker; he and TC were already intricately connected through the thousands, maybe millions of fine links their sparks had formed over the past decades, even without a bond. The difference was utterly clear; Jazz could love Prowl. He already did love Thundercracker... Thundercracker already had him, spark, mind, and soul. He always would.

::I know,:: the Seeker said soothingly. He was almost amused. ::What a mess all of us are:::

::But this is about us. The two of us,:: Jazz insisted. He moved even closer, their sparks fully coalescing, sending his systems into a frenzy. ::You and me, and no one else:::

Thundercracker cradled the back of his helm. ::Yes:::

The heat between them struck out against the winter air. Jazz dropped his focus on the outside world and sank into the sensation of union between them. This felt right. It felt like this was what he should have always done, forever. He had never felt closer or more connected to another creature.

He saw Thundercracker's life, innately knowing the triumphs, the failures, the moments of joy, and the moments of sorrow, as if he himself had experienced them. He felt the ghosts of people who had once mattered—and the affection for them that still lingered in his spark millennia later. He saw Vos through the eyes of a Seeker, a place built on dreams, a place that had once given them a home and a sense of purpose.

He saw the fall of Cybertron from the opposing side—the rise of Megatron, the fall of friends, the loss of their world. He felt the agony of another soldier, knowing that Thundercracker could feel his own despair for the same exact reasons. Eons and eons passed in a blur, but every emotion and potent feeling pummeled him like each disaster was happening right then and there.

He saw the horrors of Earth. The fall of their mutual armies. He felt Thundercracker's final loss of hope when Skywarp was deactivated. He felt the torture of his spark when the bond they had shared was severed, sending him into dark, merciless Hell.

He saw his own face, a specter in the clouds of dust and destruction, peering out like a beacon in what had seemed like absolute darkness.

The years blended. More faces—all so important, all with so much varying affection attached to them—emerged. He saw their daughter, felt the pride in her, and the fierce love only a parent could have. He saw their friends and felt how much he cared for each one, how much he wanted to protect them in any way he could. He saw the guilt Thundercracker would always bear when he looked at Danny, the child he had taken away from her father in an attempt to save her.

He saw his own cruelty, his denials, his emotional stubbornness. He saw how Thundercracker had forgiven him each time, realized Thundercracker had understood him in a way no one else ever would have. He saw how much he had grown through the jet's optics; he saw how much the torment he had put himself through for fifty years had also tortured his lover. Jazz trembled.

::Forgive yourself::: Thundercracker said gently.

For the first time, Jazz did.

Jazz felt the desire build up within Thundercracker's spark to once again connect to another soul, to give the entirety of himself, everything that made him Thundercracker. His life, his body, his soul.

Without a moment of hesitation, Jazz took it—and offered up just the same. Thundercracker grasped it and Jazz knew he would never let it go.
All at once, there was no Jazz, there was no Thundercracker. Time and reality ceased to exist. It left them falling deeper and deeper into a sense of being that had no boundaries and no end. There was oneness and a single word that united two sparks across space and time:

Together.

Always, and forever.

Reality came back in a fog, but Jazz didn't care about looking anywhere else with his mind or optics. He found himself lying still, spark beating out a steady pulse that was returned by another, looking directly into what could have been a mirror. He stared down at Thundercracker and could feel the echoes of his own spark shiver across the invisible lines that tied them together.

Jazz cradled Thundercracker's face with his cupped hands and smiled. Thundercracker smiled back and the moment just seemed to freeze, searing forever into Jazz's mind.

I love you.

And everything was perfect.

End Chapter 41.

Chapter End Notes

Let's get this party started.

A/Ns:
- To make this utterly clear: TC could totally fall for Prowl. Jazz could totally re-fall in love with Prowl. Prowl is unfortunately not that different from the two of them in this case. If you don't see what's on the horizon, well, just wait for Interlude #5.
- Addition to the previous note: I blame Shantastic entirely in the best of ways for this scenario.
- Many many apologies to Perceptor, who apparently has no luck at all when I'm the author. ): Sorry, dude.
The irony of the situation did not escape her that she was finally going to Africa. Well, honestly, Afghanistan wasn't in Africa, it was in Asia, but she'd be flying over Africa at the very least. And after what had happened nearly six months ago in a foreign future, that was close enough for her. Kass didn't joke about it, and neither did her friends, whom she suspected also realized that little fact. She wondered if this was the cosmos' way of poking fun at their meek mortal plans.

It was irrelevant now. Kass had gathered supplies from the med-bay as quietly as she could, to spare herself the pain of talking to Wildrider about the situation while they were alone. So far he'd spent every non-therapeutic moment either entertained by a combination of Danny, Barns and Arcee, or in recharge, healing, so Kass made use of that time. She knew she'd have to face him eventually; she knew he knew about her leaving the base to go alone to another base. Wildrider had never been happy at the thought of their team splitting up, so she dreaded his reaction.

He wasn't the only one unhappy about the situation. Kass wasn't exactly pleased about it, and she knew that Bluestreak was still terribly upset. Rachel had done her best to relieve her own anxieties by offering combat advice. That had worked until Rachel had finally grown too upset and had to stop, and Kass had offered her worried friend a hug instead; neither of them had ever been very good at sharing their feelings. It was one of the cornerstones of their friendship.

The others were also nervous for her. Although several of their group were leaving Plumas, they were going together. Barns would be going with Jazz and Thundercracker. Rachel would be with Vortex. Although originally Prowl had said he was sending Bluestreak with Optimus' team, the most recent tactical plot indicated that his sniping would be more useful in a guaranteed combat environment. Surprisingly the team that would need him the most was the South American team, so he would probably end up being assigned to work with Rachel and Vortex, much to Vortex's ire. Arcee was displeased that she would have to leave, but Kass was glad the femme would be staying behind to keep Wildrider and Danny company, and to help Bumblebee as he watched over Sam and Miles. They'd be safe here, at least.

Mikaela had been incredibly upset that she was staying and Kass was the one headed out.

"It's not fair!" Mikaela had exclaimed the previous day, when Ratchet had told them of their different placements. The tan woman grabbed Kass's hands and looked heartbroken. "I can't believe they're sending you out there. I can't believe Ratchet's okay with this."
"I'm NOT," Ratchet had snarled from outside the room. Their last lesson together had been punctuated by the medic's vocal rage accompanied by objects being thrown around. "If it wasn't so close to the fragging battle, I'd have ripped that sparkless, Unicron-spawned Praxian's doorwings right off for suggesting this! He's out of his fragging processors, and believe me, once this slagging mess is over with, I'm going to—!"

"It's for the best," Kass said, ignoring their teacher's enraged ranting. She tried to smile for Mikaela's sake. "Don't worry, Mik. I'll be okay. They're going to need a medic, and I'm a bit more prepared than you are."

"You shouldn't be going alone," Mikaela said, still concerned. She shook her head. "I wish I was allowed to go with you."

Kass selfishly wished that were true as well, but orders were orders. They both knew this was a risk. Sort of. Ratchet had always told them they'd probably never see a battle field, at least not this soon, but… times had changed. Priorities had changed. Kass was barely worthy of being called a medic, but she accepted the responsibilities of the position. The Autobots incoming from Hyperion who were scheduled to land in Afghanistan needed her to at least pretend to be a real medic for them to rely on.

Mikaela was now scheduled to travel stateside with Optimus' crew. They'd be moving southward to start working on drone sites nearby. That way, they'd have more of the United States' forces to back them up as well. Little by little, everyone found their places.

Some had easier places than others, Kass realized, even if it seemed unfair. Sam was disappointed he was to remain at Plumas with Bumblebee, but he wasn't sulking. He was going to be helping the remaining NEST crews by organizing supply shipments to the various teams around the world. He'd be spending a lot of time on the phone with Keller's office and with the NEST teams, then would spend his time trying to negotiate delivery from government officials from various countries. He was absolutely thrilled to have a "real" job, especially one that seemed to actually fall in line with his eventual career goals, but he was less than thrilled to see his girlfriend being sent effectively to the front lines.

"At least she's got Optimus watching her back," Miles said, trying to be sage at their last breakfast together.

Sam nodded, only a little appeased. Mikaela scoffed at both of them. "I know how to dodge," she said dryly.

"All too well," Sam replied. Both teens, having survived their own battles before, shared a moment of understanding and the topic was dropped.

That left only one other person Kass had yet to really talk to about her own deployment. Almost five months ago, she never would have expected to have to talk to this certain someone about anything. Now… it felt like an obligation.

When he didn't want to be found, Miles was difficult to locate on the not-so-crowded NEST base. With most of the remaining soldiers running around, Kass felt a little lost in the crowd. She had almost given up on finding him when she finally spotted the blond-haired man shuffling toward her outside of Hanger A. He looked a bit nervous and kept his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets, but Miles was always a little awkward looking, Kass supposed.

He did have reasons to be nervous, she also admitted, though she'd never bring it up to him or anyone else. At least, not right now.
"Hi, Miles," she said, smiling at the younger teen when he was close enough.

"H-hey…" Miles offered, stuttering a bit, which had nothing to do with the early December weather now. He glanced around, desperate for a way to keep talking. "So, uh, you're… um… moving out?"

Kass ignored the flair of nervousness in her own stomach when she considered what he meant. "Yup," she replied. She tucked her own hands into her pockets. "I guess about eight hours? I'm not really sure. I keep forgetting to ask."

She had never taken a real plane ride before. She had only ever flown in Vortex, but never for very long or for a long distance. She hoped she wouldn't be afraid of the trip. She had enough fears building up to have to deal with aerophobia as well.

Miles had nodded and looked like he was about to say something in reply to that, but faltered. Kass waited patiently.

"Kass…" the boy began again, shifting on his feet. He looked sheepish. "I'm… really bad at talking."

That made her smirk. "I never would have guessed," she joked, trying to lighten the mood.

Blinking, Miles took a moment to get it. "Huh—oh! Ha, yeah, well, I mean, I'm bad at talking about… this… stuff," he said, grinning weakly.

He hesitated and seemed unsure of how to begin. True to his nature, Miles overcame this by simply talking faster.

"I-I know I'm kind of a loser, and you've got like… two inches on me…" he began, talking faster the more anxious he got. "And you're smarter, and older—but not like super old, or whatever!" He suddenly turned bright red. "It's only like two years and—shit, okay, I messed up already!"

He ran a furious hand through his long hair and Kass hid a smile.

"Miles, I get what you mean," she interrupted gently.

Miles bit his lip and was staring her down like he wasn't sure if she were a bear or a harmless bunny. His eyes were so expressive. "Would you…" he started, words dislodging from his throat rather than flowing smoothly, "want to, you know, maybe… hang out?"

It was Kass's turn to blink uncomprehendingly. "Now?" she asked, not entirely sure. Miles did have rather bad timing for things.

"No, I mean, um, when you guys come back?" Miles asked, now clearly torn between hope and fear. He was still rambling. "I don't know if it'll be busy around here afterwards, but maybe—"

A sympathetic smile reached Kass' face, though she didn't pity him. He didn't do that to her, so it wasn't fair if she did it to him. "Miles," she broke in, easily earning his intense attention.

He froze and looked like he was expecting something violent instead of a simple answer. Kass forced the sympathy out of her smile and tried to be gentle.

"I'd like that," she said quietly. "I'd love to hang out with you."

The stunned look that bloomed on his pink face made her stifle a laugh. "…Really?" he asked, floored by the positive response.
Giving in, Kass laughed. "Yes," she said, nodding.

It was interesting, she thought absently, as Miles seemed to relax and cheer up at her agreement. She had never once thought she'd be able to agree to date, or hang out, whichever, with a boy. She had always wondered what would become of her in their little group of eleven, since they had never seemed to be willing to take on any more survivors at the camps they came across. Kass had wondered, not bitterly however, when it would be her turn to find someone to love. Now… things were different. She still wasn't sure what was to become of her, or Miles, but now at least they had time…

Sort of. Kass hid a grimace when she finally managed to shoo the younger teen away, citing a need to get packed. He wished her luck, gave her a tight hug, and waved cheerfully as he went to go find Sam and Mikaela, presumably to share the good news. Kass waved back at him, a little disconnected from her previous happiness now.

They would have time if she came back. Kass fought that pessimism down, but it was still there, haunting her. A lot of things rested on her surviving this mission overseas. She didn't want to think about the odds against her, so she couldn't really dwell on anything happy either. It was bothersome.

Turning, Kass had started to think about packing again, when she noticed Bluestreak standing at the entrance to Hanger B. He didn't look upset, although Kass knew he must have seen her with Miles. Considering advanced mech hearing, he probably had heard the conversation. Nervous for ridiculous reasons, Kass slowly approached her friend.

Bluestreak didn't appear agitated and crouched a bit when she was close enough they could talk.

"He's a nice boy," the mech said quietly. He was watching Miles still, and Kass was pleased to see that the usual anxious twitch of his doorwings was gone. He was getting better at dealing with this.

"He is," Kass agreed. She rested a hand on his side and smiled. "Thank you for understanding, Blue."

Bluestreak's gaze slowly fell to her and Kass knew he must have been thinking so many different things. She wished she could take away some of those thoughts, because she knew they were painful to deal with.

"You could be happy with him," Bluestreak suddenly said. He tried to sound optimistic, but Kass could see his doorwings quivering a bit.

Kass laughed quietly and nodded, looking to the ground. "I could be happy with a variety of people," she said carefully. "Including you, the rest of our family, and maybe Miles."

Perhaps. Perhaps, she could be happy, as her parents had wanted her to be, settling with someone in an actual home. And not just in the caves, which had always been her expectation as a child. She could have a house. A house. With a yard. And a family. And…

Kass looked up, now a bit embarrassed at herself. She couldn't afford to think she'd never come back from this mission, but she definitely couldn't afford to get ahead of herself with silly plans. She couldn't be distracted by thoughts of what-ifs. She had to stay in the present.

"I…"

She looked up when Bluestreak had spoken. He was staring at her with a heartbreaking expression she couldn't place. The intensity of his gaze alarmed her, but before she could ask what was wrong, Bluestreak leaned a little closer, words he had been holding back spilling free.
"When I ran into you in the woods… I thought the only thing that mattered to me was making sure Kevin was okay," he said, shocking her. "But he wasn't, and everyone else was gone. But before I even had a chance to take it all in, I learned that you were his sister. I—I thought that… maybe that's why I met you. Because we both had cared so much about Kevin, that it was only fitting we ended up taking care of each other."

This had obviously been on his mind for awhile, for him to have clearly held back until now, and Kass didn't know what to say. She could see grief in his optics that had nothing to do with her dating Miles.

"But a long time later, when we were traveling with the others, I realized it wasn't about me making up for what I failed to do with Kevin," he said, his words heavier and harder for Kass to hear. "You were my friend. You have become my best friend. I never had siblings, because they don't exist on Cybertron like they do for humans here, but I knew what it was like to lose everyone you loved. Somewhere, somehow you became my sister. I don't want you to die, ever, Kass."

His words faded into a whine and Kass found herself shaking.

"Oh… Blue…" she managed, her voice cracking. She reached up to touch his face. "I love you too, Bluestreak. You're my brother. Never doubt that."

Bluestreak shook his helm, promising wordlessly that he wouldn't doubt that. Kass knew that he was terrified she wouldn't come back, and that there was no way he could help. It broke her heart, and didn't do much to ease her own fears about the same thing. She tried to be strong, however, for both their sakes. Taking a deep breath, she moved closer.

"When I first tagged along with you, Blue… I told myself, 'maybe he can replace Kevin in my heart. So it's not as painful,'" she said, ashamed. She shook her head. "But over time I realized how cruel this was to you, and to Kevin. You're not a replacement for anyone. Kevin will always be my baby brother. But you're also my brother. My giant, metal, little brother who I don't think anyone could ever hate. You're selfless and brave, Bluestreak." She laughed and patted his cheek, heart aching. "I am proud to be your sister."

Optics shining brightly, Bluestreak bowed over more and Kass could hear his systems rattling.

"Please, please, come back," he begged desperately.

Kass closed her eyes. "I'll try. I can't promise anything more," she said. She touched her head to his. "You come back, too, Bluestreak."

"I'll try," he promised, and that was all they could give each other.

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They met up in Wildrider's room, or rather, the med-bay. Ratchet had given them all, especially Jazz, scathing glares, but he had to leave for his own flight. Thundercracker and Jazz opted to hang back by the doorway, and there still wasn't a lot of room for the others. Jazz had to laugh at the way everyone crowded around Wildrider, who was at least sitting up now. The poor sports car was suffering from cabin fever already and was immensely glad for the company. Sort of.

"You are stupid," Wildrider said to Vortex, glaring at him. It was the first time they had seen each other since Vortex had returned.

Vortex glared back and clearly held himself back from hitting the injured mech on the helm. "You have no right to call anyone else that," he spat.
"Actually, I have to side with 'Rider on that one," Danny replied coolly. The others laughed and Vortex seethed.

It was good to have them all together, talking. Jazz leaned against Thundercracker's side in contented quiet. He could feel the thrum of Thundercracker's presence against his own spark. That was an odd thing to get used to, but Jazz was beginning to see how amazing it was. He had never felt more loved. Especially with the rest of their family right there.

Of course, the small talk eventually turned serious. Jazz had expected it, as had the others, because despite the growing stillness between them, none of their ten seemed surprised when Wildrider's gaze fell to Kass on Bluestreak's shoulder.

"Little Kass going to Afghanistan?" Wildrider asked, optics narrowed.

The human nodded. "Yes," she said. She smiled and shrugged, trying to remain optimistic, which Jazz appreciated. "I'll be back before you know it. They're not expecting a huge influx of Decepticons there. Most likely America will be the first target."

"You fight vell, but don't trust not to have to duck much," Wildrider replied, still more serious than normal. "Kick aft for me, yes?"

"I will," Kass promised. She smiled at the injured mech. "You just have to promise to get well fast, mate."

Wildrider turned to another human rapidly. "Barns, where you are going?" he asked.

"To Germany, to the same base as TC and Jazz," Barns explained. He smiled over at the two mechs in question. "I'll be doing mostly planning and logistics, so I should not be seeing any action."

Jazz nodded as well. Barns was going to be helping the NEST team set up over in Europe. His knowledge about how the drones worked would help prepare German and European soldiers; with downloads from their team, WJ would help soldiers in China the same way.

"Which is good," Arcee broke in. "Even I will be out of action. I'll be remaining here at Plumas with Danny and Bumblebee. We'll rotate out eventually to Prime's unit, but we'll be here for now."

"Keeping me company," Wildrider teased. Surprisingly, Arcee just shook her head with a small smile on her faceplates. The red-and-black mech turned his attention to Rachel. "And Rachel?"

The blond was sitting with Danny on the other med-bay table. "Gonna go south to Brazil. Me and 'Tex are gonna be hunting down drones," Rachel replied. She smirked up at Vortex. "Just like the old days, only this time, we have an army backing us up."

"It's going to be too great ripping those monstrosities to shreds," Vortex added, visor narrowed. The others hummed in agreement.

"Just don't get killed, okay? Both of you have had too many close calls," Bluestreak said, doorwings twitching anxiously. "And…"

The gunner trailed off and the med-bay fell quiet. Jazz pressed further against Thundercracker, mostly in a subconscious gesture to ward off the awkwardness. Thundercracker sent back a wave of reassurance that was still a bit dizzying. Jazz watched their family avoid looking at each other as the weight of the situation hit them again.

Tension boiling deep in his spark, Jazz couldn't stand the silence. They couldn't.
"...Okay, this is just awkward," he announced. He didn't try to make this funny; he did try to keep them from dropping down too much further into that depression again. He made sure they were all looking at him before he continued. "We're gonna be seeing some bad stuff soon. Everyone is. It's gonna be scary going where we all gotta go, but it's gonna be worse knowing we're not gonna be having each other's backs like we used to."

"And everyone pretty much has at least someone else with them," Barns added. "I am scheduled to meet with TC and Jazz's team in Germany after I fly in with Lieutenant Kane."

"Kass doesn't have anyone," Bluestreak pointed out, morose.

"I'll be okay. I'm a medic, not a frontliner," Kass said quickly. "Besides, I'll have Sideswipe and Mirage with me. We know them."

Wildrider growled. "Not well enough," Danny muttered.

"But!" Jazz interrupted. "That's not th' point."

Rachel frowned. "What is the point?"

"That we're comin' back. All of us," he said. He crossed his arms against his chassis. "There's no tellin' when this battle will be over, or when it's gonna start, but it will end. An' when it does, we'll get back here an' we fix what we can."

There was a pause. Jazz waited for it.

"What if someone does not come back?" Wildrider asked, optics narrowed. Others didn't say anything, but they didn't have to. They all were thinking it.

Insecurity, worry and support tingled against his spark. Jazz looked up and saw the same things in Thundercracker's optics as they exchanged glances.

"...Then we deal with it," Jazz said, looking back at the rest of their family. He smiled confidently, gratefully accepting his sparkmate's emotional support. He was beginning to wonder how he had ever managed without it. "We deal with it, together."

The ten of them, with Wheeljack watching out for them from the Well, would do just fine. Jazz had never once thought they'd live in a world with Prime, with an army to support them, or even the barest glimmer of hope that maybe— they could win.

He would not let that glimmer of hope die without a fight. He would not let his family's future simply fade into the dark world they had done everything to leave behind.

Barns looked at the others before nodding. "...Right," he said. Some of the others tried to nod, too.

Jazz smiled. "We don't go into this thinking that some of us aren't comin' back. That's not how you make it through the darkest parts of life," he said, trying to be both comforting and lighthearted enough to push away the remaining grimness. "Back in Europe, we knew the risks of simply livin', but you can't tell me we didn't focus on surviving first."

"This is just like home," Thundercracker added, mirroring the words Jazz had in his spark. He gave their friends a firm stare. "And what did we do, for as long as we could, with as many of us as we could take with us?"

There was a quiet shifting of feet and pedes. "Survive," Danny replied, voice only a little soft.
Thundercracker inclined his helm. "Exactly."

For most of them, that almost helped. The silence returned, but Jazz felt a bit of the pressure lift. He could tell his friends, especially the humans, were trying to focus on the fact they had to get ready to leave. They had made their choices, and now they had to deal with them. Jazz could tell that their fear was finally coming under control.

Bluestreak raised his helm and his doorwings quivered. The others looked at him expectantly and the gunner seemed to gather his strength.

"...I love all of you," he said, his optics shining with so much sincerity it was enough to break a spark. Jazz leaned back further into Thundercracker.

Kass smiled. "Love you too, mate," she said, her own eyes shining. She wasn't the only one, either.

Barns raised two fingers, sharing his own mild smirk. "To a better future," he said simply.

Wildrider rumbled. "На Здоровье. Cheers," he said, mirroring the gesture. The others did, too.

Eventually, it had to end. They drifted out of the room, only Danny and Barns remaining to keep Wildrider company for a while longer before heading back on their own. Jazz had followed Thundercracker out of the hangar and was contemplating how they would spend the last few hours they had State-side when someone spoke up behind them.

"Jazz, TC?"

Jazz almost stumbled when he slowed to a stop, as did Thundercracker. Both focused their gazes down on Rachel, who was standing a few feet away. She looked incredibly small, which was odd; she always made herself seem larger with her attitude. Jazz crouched to make their size difference even less.

"Yeah?" he asked.

He had seen her claw her way through life from such a young age. He had seen her battle both literal monsters, and the monsters that nightmares and treacherous inner thoughts brought out, the one that made all of their human friends wake up screaming every so often. Rachel had been no different. Jazz had done what he could to raise her out of that horrible life. He had always known she would be a strong adult, a fearless woman. He had been right.

"Thank you," Rachel said, to both her parents. "For everything."

He didn't want that to be a goodbye. It wasn't. Jazz refused to let it be that, after so many close calls. He regretted raising her in a world of goodbyes, even if he really hadn't had any more of a choice than the child had.

"...Thank you, kiddo," he said, smiling wanly. He nodded back at Thundercracker, who rumbled lowly. "For makin' life better fer us."

There was no denying the fact that Rachel had not only made them stronger as a couple, but had also completed them. Jazz had never expected to have a family—even, even if the Autobots had won. He once saw it as unnecessary, even a liability.

No way did he think that now. No way.

His comment made Rachel scoff. "I made your life Hell," she replied, finally braving a smirk, which
meant she was joking, even if only partially.

Thundercracker immediately shook his helm. "No…" He crouched down as well next to Jazz. "Quite the opposite, Rachel." Jazz nodded in agreement.

Rachel took a deep breath. Collected herself. This was different than before their flight from the caves. She wasn't looking to say any goodbyes this time, Jazz realized.

"When we get back, let's go flying," she said. She held her head up higher and her smile, while unsteady, grew. "And then racing, on both sky and ground. The suit can let me do that with you now."

Jazz felt the buzz of both pride and amusement from Thundercracker, which made him grin, too. He reached out and offered his hand for both of them.

"Yes," he agreed. "We'd love that, Rachel."

He wasn't prepared—although he should have been—for her to ignore his hand. Rachel closed the distance between them stiffly and skillfully kicked off of his arm to reach up to his neck. Jazz froze when he felt her toss as much of her tiny, organic arms around his neck as she could, mostly because he didn't want to pinch her. The emotions that churned in his spark, all his own, also made him pause.

"Thank you for teaching me to be brave," Rachel said, whispering into his neck plating.

Briefly, he felt grief. But then, that faded. There wasn't anything to grieve about right now. Now… now was the time to be grateful.

Jazz smiled and embraced her gently with one hand. "You didn't need me to teach that to you, Rach," he replied quietly. "Thank you for teaching me."

It took everything they had to go and actually get ready for their individual trips. Jazz found himself standing aside and watching their team make final checks and final, tense goodbyes.

*Until later,* was a common phrase. Jazz knew that was the best they could offer each other. He shuttered his visor and held onto that meek promise anyway. He barely flinched when he felt the larger mech slide up next to him. The bond didn't allow for surprises, anyway.

::*Let's go.*:: Thundercracker told him.

A hand larger than his interlaced through his clawed fingers and squeezed. The true comfort came through the reassuring pulse of the bond.

Jazz smiled and returned both gestures.

::*Let's.*::

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She wasn't a strategist, or very interested in politics, but Danny knew the mission. Those headed to Europe, Asia and the Middle East were to be ready to leap into action in each of those various places, which had a lot of energy reserves and so were major targets. Some of their teams, like Vortex and Rachel's, were headed to drone locations they had detected in other areas, like South America. It was a massive move by NEST, the Autobots and their international allies to do what they could to tell Galvatron they were ready and willing to fight, and they would not go down easily.
The notion of running head-first into battle, or purposely egging the already violent Decepticons on, was terrifying, but Danny was beginning to feel her adrenaline rush every time she saw the helicopters land to pick up more mechs, or heard the talking of soldiers about plans. She wasn’t looking forward to her friends going out there into danger…but the idea of finally, finally, seeing their side fighting back against the monsters who had hunted them… was oddly compelling.

It didn’t make it any easier to stand aside as her friends, human and mech, got ready to move out. She felt bad remaining on base, even if she was still with Arcee, Wildrider and Sam’s group. Danny was nervous when she saw Rachel testing her suit, when she saw Kass try to calm Bluestreak down before they separated.

It was especially hard to see Barns packing his own bag to leave with Thundercracker and Jazz to go to Germany. It was a small, small mercy that he’d be with those two at least, and would be stuck on a base there. Still… he’d be there, and not here, with Danny. That made her gut twist painfully when she realized they’d only have a few more hours together before…

While she stood there, with her arms wrapped around herself in an attempt to keep from fidgeting, she noticed Barns had begun to look at her too. Danny tried to smile, even if the result was weaker than normal. Barns smiled back anyway and stood up to go over to her side of the camp.

"I wanted to talk to you about something," he said in lieu of greeting. He took her hand and started to lead her toward the side offices. "Come with me?"

Danny nodded and obligingly followed the man toward the offices, which had been perpetually dark for the last few weeks while everyone’s attention was elsewhere. They went into the computer room and Danny could see a faint layer of dust on the computers once Barns flicked the overhead lights on.

"What's up?" she meant to ask, turning around to find Barns.

She didn't have to look far. However, she did have to look somewhere a bit lower than she had been expecting. Barns was the tallest of their four humans, even taller than Kass by at least a few inches. Danny, being the shortest, and according to human expectations rather short compared to any other human her age (she blamed early childhood malnutrition like Wheeljack told her), had learned to look up when speaking to Barns…as well as pretty much everyone else. That was perfectly fine by her, though.

That was why it was peculiar that Danny did not have to look up to face her boyfriend. Instead, he was just about eye-level with her now, kneeling on the floor.

Needless to say, Danny was a bit startled. She stared at him and waited for some sort of response from the clearly-nervous Barns for why he was on the ground. Was he upset about leaving…?

"Danielle," he began, voice thick. He took both of her hands in his.

Danny continued to look down at him uncertainly. "…Yes?" she prompted.

"When I get back…" he said, struggling for words. He looked like he was about to choke, before he finally blurted, "Will you marry me?"

In the tiny office, without any humming computers even, there was silence. Everything outside the room effectively ceased to matter.

Danny stared at him.
Barns smiled weakly from the floor.

"...You're supposed to say yes," he said, sheepish.

All at once, her brain exploded with a variety of words, either variants of the word 'yes' or something incoherent that might have been glee, but to be honest, she wasn't really about to distinguish any of it through the wave of euphoria and panic that hit her.

"Yes," she managed to get out, her voice barely able to get past her throat. "Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

With a shriek, she flung herself at Barns, who managed to catch her in time. She clung to him tightly until he finally managed to draw back to look her in the eyes.

"I was supposed to ask your father for permission," he explained, the only proof of his own excitement in his eyes. "But Wildrider said it was okay."

That made Danny laugh through her tears, which had sprung up from elation. "Wheeljack would have said yes, too," she said, meaning it. She smiled at the thought of her father. He would have approved. He would have been so happy.

Barns smiled back at her, his dark eyes soft. "When I get back," he promised, hugging her again.

Danny buried her face into his neck, memorizing every bit of him. "When you get back," she agreed.

She would be there, waiting.

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Los Angeles, California
Next Morning, 8:00 AM

Optimus was pleased the first stage of their mission was finally taking off, literally. With Ironhide's team scheduled to land soon on the Chinese mainland from Diego Garcia, Optimus' team also took off. The day had arrived after a tense night for everyone as they had departed the Plumas base, moving first to Amedee and now to Los Angeles. The international teams had flown out the night before, and were all starting to arrive in their respective control areas. His team was the last to leave Plumas.

Their convoy was an odd one. Skyfire was flanking them in his alt-mode, which had startled the humans. He was larger than even the Seekers and his form was an odd sight to see flying at such low altitudes (even if the shuttle flew higher than the rest of them), but they had learned that Cybertronian shuttles were just as alien as the mechs were to them in bi-pedal forms.

Inside NEST-1 (NEST-2 was carrying Ironhide's squad over the Pacific, while subsequent aircrafts were also in route to their other international bases), Optimus felt what the humans called déjà vu, being strapped in while in his alt-mode next to several of his fellow soldiers. Jolt, Prowl, Hound, Trailbreaker and Cliffjumper were on his team specifically this time. The trip was a short one, but they had too many mechs going in to avoid using the C-5M.

There weren't only mechs on board, though there wasn't too much room for anyone else. Optimus kept a close eye on his human companions, because, well, some of them weren't exactly common sights to see. Epps was in charge of a small contingent of soldiers, with several squads on another plane, but there was another odd sight.

Buckled into a seat attached to the wall facing his side, Mikaela Banes was quietly watching the rest
of the flight crew, looking very out of place. She was wearing army fatigues, but had an armband that showed she was a civilian medic. With her long dark hair swept up at the top of her head, she looked ready to leap to action if they needed her.

Optimus had worried about Prowl's plan to bring Mikaela with them to Los Angeles. They had so few medics, however, that they were forced to make difficult choices. She had willingly agreed to help them and seemed to be handling the stress she must obviously be under quite well. The plan was simple enough; they'd set up base at LAX and she would be stationed there to receive any damaged mechs at the airport. It was a far cry from a base, but they had to make sure that they had a secure area of command within the city.

He trusted Prowl and Mirage's planning. Very few of the mechs not assigned to the unit headed in with Optimus or a part of Special Ops knew what was happening. Epps was one of the few humans who did as well, and they had to trust his soldiers would obey his unexpected directives once they landed. Mikaela did not know. She'd be briefed along with the others once they landed, but Optimus knew the girl would handle the unexpected information well. She had in the past.

After about twenty minutes, Optimus saw Mikaela was fidgeting, bouncing her leg. He rumbled quietly.

"Mikaela," he said, getting her attention.

"Optimus," she replied. She smiled, trying to be brave. "This is kind of exciting. I haven't been to LA since I was eight."

Optimus knew he couldn't offer much support, especially while stuck in his alt-mode, but he did his best to reach out to her. "Are you alright?" he asked.

Mikaela hesitated. "...Yeah. Nervous. I guess everyone is," she admitted with a shrug. She laughed suddenly, her organic eyes shining. "You have no idea how good it is to see you up and about, Optimus. So to speak."

"So I've begun to understand from everyone pointing that out. It's good to see you as well, regardless," the Prime replied, a bit wryly. He understood he had caused all of his friends undue grief, and even if it was illogical, he felt sorry for it. "I apologize for—"

All at once, Mikaela's expression turned thunderous. "If you apologize for dying, I'm going to have to do something remotely insubordinate, like throwing a wrench at your windshield," she interrupted, glaring. The threat in her voice was humorously familiar.

That made Optimus laugh. "You've been studying under Ratchet too long," he said, chuckling.

The human grinned. "You know it," she said cheekily. That was enough to lighten his mood and he hoped hers.

They landed at the Los Angeles International Airport without any rush. Optimus was counting on Prowl to keep track of the timeline Soundwave had forwarded to Skyfire. They were putting a lot of trust into those two, he realized, but they didn't have much of a choice. This was their biggest chance to draw Galvatron out from the shadows.

Speaking of Skyfire... the white shuttle had landed and transformed, leaving several human soldiers gaping in shock at the huge mech. Skyfire approached Optimus and the other Autobots casually, ignoring the humans. He didn't seem that impressed by them.

"Prime," the scientist said, bowing his head respectfully once he stopped short of the Autobot leader.
Optimus nodded back. "Skyfire," he acknowledged. He wasn't sure if he liked Skyfire yet, but the mech had proven to be useful so far. He glanced around. "Are you certain this location will receive the response we need?"

"Yes, Prime," Skyfire said. He folded his hands behind his back calmly. "Soundwave can't respond to any queries now, but his last message three hours ago affirmed that Galvatron had taken the bait."

Below them, Optimus heard a NEST soldier stop and give the two mechs an odd look. Mikaela was also only a few feet away, and even though she wasn't a soldier, she was very intelligent. She honed in on that statement quickly.

"What's he talking about?" she asked, frowning. "What bait?"

Optimus glanced at the other Autobots; Jolt looked amused, but none of the other mechs shared his humor. Neither did Optimus.

"We're not lookin' for the drones," Epps answered for them, before calling for his men to rally around to listen.

Mikaela blanched. "What? Wait, what are we doing here then?" she asked, peering around the airport. "I thought you guys were going to hit nearby hives?"

There was a brief pause before Prowl stepped forward. "Skyfire and Soundwave have set up their own initiative, under Autobot direction," he explained simply. "We have made it so that the Decepticons will meet us here in direct combat, particularly Galvatron's unit."

"Wait… in the city?" Mikaela asked, startled. She had good reason to be alarmed, Optimus realized. The last time the Autobots were in this city, they had been worried about the civilians, he had learned.

"LA's been evacuated for ten miles around LAX, starting two days ago, complete with a full media blackout," Epps replied. He looked grim anyway and glanced up at Optimus. "I hope this is a good idea, Big Guy. That blackout's only gonna hold for a few more hours, maybe." An intentional electrical failure had also helped limit civilian access to communication channels to spread the news of the evacuation, but it wouldn't last.

"We are facing a seventy-three percent failure rate," Prowl responded. He shrugged faintly. "However, I am optimistic."

"Or suicidal," Jolt quipped. He flashed his commander a grin. "Love ya anyway, Prowl. We trust you not to totally get us slagged."

Mikaela didn't look nearly as positive. "How reassuring," she said, eyeing them all warily.

"Don't worry, Mikaela," Optimus said. He knelt to try to meet her gaze on an equal level. "The trap gives us the time to prepare. You will head back to the hangars to prepare a medical area."

By the time the Decepticons arrived, they would push away from the LAX's property, toward where more of their soldiers would be stationed for a rear attack. The United States Air Force was also holding in a state of readiness off the coast. They would meet Galvatron's expected Seeker forces with their allies', plus Optimus Prime. According to Soundwave, none of the Decepticons knew the Autobot leader was alive again. That was a great ace for them.

"R-right," Mikaela said, not looking entirely convinced. She looked around at their team nervously. "So, you're like, wanting the Decepticons to come here?"
"No. We want Galvatron to come here," Skyfire corrected her. He looked utterly calm compared to the humans. "Soundwave will have given him the information he 'picked up,' that many of the Autobots' leaders will be here temporarily. He left out the fact that the humans have evacuated the area, so Galvatron will not be expecting a trap, or know that we are expecting him."

With Epps barking out the last few details, their team moved quickly. Mikaela disappeared with several other mechanics, who would work with her to set up a med-bay inside a hangar at the west end of the airport, away from where they planned for the fighting to take place. The rest of NEST had their own positions to take, along the north and south runways and the eastern edge of the airport. The roads and highways leading to the city would be the main battlefield, they surmised, so it was good that the evacuation had worked out. Damage to property was far less important than civilian casualties.

Standing slowly, Optimus looked out over the airfield, which had been emptied of most civilian planes. They had spent the last seventy-two hours working as closely as possible with the people of Los Angeles, particularly the El Segundo region where they would concentrate most of the fighting. Only a handful of humans knew the reason that region of the city had been effectively quarantined by the military, but he was grateful that so few questions were asked under the cover of the military investigating a drone sighting. If their plan worked, they'd eventually push the Decepticons west and south toward El Segundo, using the ocean to pin their enemies. Granted, most of the Decepticons could fly as well as Galvatron… but Optimus hoped, just as his strategists had, that his brother's desire for a fight to the death would override his logic.

Hound had moved up closer to him and seemed nervous. Optimus looked down at him, giving him permission to speak his mind.

"I do hope ya know what yer doin', sir," the scout said. "Givin' Galvatron all this info about our teams, where they'll be…" He glanced up at the Prime and seemed uneasy. "Ya want him to attack us all over the place, huh?"

Optimus didn't blame his soldier's doubt. "Yes. If our forces are spread thin, his will be as well. He doesn't expect us to be expecting him, so we will surprise him with the amount of prepared counterattacks we have now," he said. "More than that, we needed to give Soundwave something to lure Galvatron out of his hideaway."

"Give a little, kick a lot of aft," Jolt mused, hiding his own nervousness behind his jokes, as usual. "Hope this works, boss."

They all hoped it would, especially Optimus. He couldn't help but feel solely responsible if anything went wrong with the mission now. The humans had given them much leeway in their preparations and he did not want to let their allies down.

His gaze drifted to the side and he saw Skyfire standing stoically, observing the horizon as if expecting to see their enemies appear spontaneously. The shuttle had promised that Soundwave's intel had been flawless; with it, they knew just how many soldiers they were to expect to hit the various sections of the globe, and had prepared their soldiers accordingly. Ironhide's squad would intercept an attack on Beijing, plus any drones in that region. The Middle East was preparing for an assault by the Constructicons while Germany was focusing on the drones, which had been particularly clustered according to their recent scans. Everything was prepared to the best of their abilities, but relying on only one source of information right now made Optimus uneasy.

Slowly, he approached the giant mech. Skyfire turned to face him politely and Optimus still wasn't sure what to make of the strange Autobot. There was nothing evil or treacherous about the shuttle, but Optimus couldn't get a good read off him. It was like Skyfire wasn't truly there. A ghost, the
"I know you trust him," Optimus began quietly. He peered at the flier; they were practically equals in height, with Skyfire even taller than the Prime. "But do you believe Soundwave will be able to do this?"

"He has it under control," Skyfire replied. He nodded respectfully again. "Don't worry about him, Prime. Worry about this battle."

A cough from where the humans were standing made them turn. A lieutenant who was in charge of managing communications waved toward Epps.

"Don't look up, but we just got NASA's latest update," the lieutenant said. He didn't sound happy as he pointed to the South. "Up there, seven o'clock on the horizon."

The lack of immediate concern didn't help much; everyone turned around quickly as if expecting to see Galvatron descending from the clouds. Optimus was almost relieved to see not much other than more of the airfield and the city beyond.

But he eventually spotted it, as did the Autobots. The humans had a harder time seeing it, but with the help of high tech binoculars, they were able to see the faint dark outline of something apparently hovering in the far off horizon. Optimus knew it was a dark color, but it was tinted red now. The reddish hue was much like the sun when it was setting, because of the atmosphere between them and the object.

"Primus." Prowl's doorwings twitched unhappily as he received his own data on the spacecraft. He confirmed Optimus' fears. "That is the Nemesis. The Hyperion is just beyond the moon. They'll make contact in about an hour."

It was barely perceptible in the sky, but it was still there. Optimus felt uneasy just looking at the faint black dot, barely more noticeable than any ordinary human plane at its highest altitude level.

"Aw, shit..." Epps said, aghast. He ran a hand over his bald head after handing his binoculars off to another soldier to take a look. "How far do you think it is? I mean, it's so small now..."

"The Nemesis is approximately a mile wide by your scales. So..." Prowl grimaced. "It's close."

Optimus was no astronomer, but from his experience, the starship had to be at least between the moon and Earth's orbits now. It would undoubtedly stop there to orbit on its own, sending down teams as needed. It wasn't a shuttle, so maneuvering it in the lower atmosphere wouldn't be possible. Still, this was a menacing turn of events.

"Shit," Epps said again, eloquently. No one could begrudge him for that statement.

With Nemesis there and unchallenged, for the time being, they had to anticipate incoming soldiers and shuttles headed toward Earth. Prowl was keeping close contact with Keller, who was managing their internal communications network from Washington, D.C., in a secure bunker. So far, NASA and NORAD hadn't picked up any incoming shuttles, but their South American team had to be prepared for the worst; the starship had fallen into orbit along the equator. Since they could see it on the horizon in North America, it had to have been over the South American hemisphere...

"Looks like it's game time," Jolt said. Cliffjumper sighed and cocked his weapon.

The humans began to mill around, louder than before. Optimus saw Mikaela walking back toward them across the tarmac as if ready to ask more questions. Optimus sighed quietly, knowing he would
have to find a way to gently direct her back to the hangar. Most of his soldiers were standing around anxiously, waiting for some sort of sign the fight had begun, and they couldn't have the civilians out, even if the coast was clear—

"Decepticons, inbound!"

The shout shot through them all and Optimus turned to find the human soldier who had shouted, from the back of a communications truck.

"Fourteen miles to the north, approaching fast!" the woman shouted, following a radar screen as those around her sprang into action.

To the horizon opposite of the Nemesis, Optimus could see more dark objects that weren't just hovering. They were speeding toward their location with ferocious intent. NEST soldiers leapt to arms.

And so it begins, Optimus thought, hardening his spark.

"Autobots," he called, battle mask whipping down. "Prepare for battle!"

End Chapter 42.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns:
- Barns's conversation with Wildrider went approximately like this: "May I ask Danny to marry me?" "YOU ARE GOING TO BE BONDED?" "Well, as her remaining close family, I need your permission—." "I AM SO EXCITED I WANT NIECE, YES?" "I'll take that as a go-ahead."
- Thank you, dad, for your advice concerning these stupid starships. I mean, really. Stupid science/physics!
- I HATE TIME ZONES. Prepare to hate them with me in the following chapters…
- "Nemesis…mile wide." – Yes. Starships would be very big, even if the fifty-mech crew weren't three-story tall robots.
- "Fear of flying" is called aerophobia, aviophobia, aviatophobia or pteromerhanophobia. (No idea how to pronounce that last one! –Beta)
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delays. The showdown begins! :D Brace yourselves. Also new characters!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Afghanistan Air Space
8:00 PM

They were to fight for their lives in the darkness of night. Kass had been a bit put-out when she realized that, but it wasn't up to her. She only had to be concerned with getting her med-bay in order and taking care of the poor mechs that came her way. NEST had given her a bunch of assistants (she, the assistant had assistants; Kass didn't know if she should feel amused or horrified by that), made up of military mechanics. Kass couldn't imagine someone obeying her orders but in the middle of combat surgery, she doubted anyone would really care if they received or gave orders. The lives were too important to argue.

She was on a small, gray military jet headed toward Kandahar, the United States military base that had been prepared for Decepticon contact. They had received word that Nemesis had launched more fliers directly from the starship, some of which were headed their way. With Russian and Pakistani air support to back them up, the NEST team she’d be stationed with felt confident. Kass wished she did, too.

Like the others, she'd slept as much as possible during the first and second legs of the journey, in preparation for the battle to come. But for the last few hours she’d been too restless to sleep. With a lot of time to kill, Kass had done some word puzzles in a book Miles had given her, but as they flew over Europe she had mostly stared out the window rather than talk to the female mechanic seated across from her. Su-Yueng Wilkinson, if Kass remembered her name correctly, was reading a book. There weren't too many people on the plane, so she'd had time to get lost in her thoughts. She had many thoughts.

Right now, she thought of war.

"I have to wonder," she murmured.

Wilkinson looked over at her, surprised by the conversation after hours of silence. "What?" she asked.

Kass frowned, not really looking at anything. "Why is this so important?" she asked. She gestured around them, though that didn't exactly explain her point. "The battle for Earth? It's not just the resources."
The army mechanic shrugged. "Maybe it is. You heard how desperate they are for them." They had all heard about how both Autobots and Decepticons were in need of energon. That's what had started most of the fighting, anyway.

"Yeah, but that's only important if one side wins," Kass said, shaking her head. Her eyes narrowed in concentration. "Earth is unimportant. The main thing that makes this so... so crucial to fight, and not just win, is the fact that their armies are here to fight."

"Huh?" Wilkinson asked, confused.

She wasn't sure why she was bothering to wonder these things, but flying toward battle in a foreign country had given Kass a moment for introspection. This would probably be her last chance to really have peace and quiet to think. Why these thoughts were the ones to spring forward was unimportant, really.

"Their war started back on Cybertron—was started for control of Cybertron. But the war destroyed their planet, and they had to leave. The war didn't end, though. They've been fighting for thousands of years in space. Fighting in small groups in sparse sections of space, rarely seeing their commanders. In fact, I doubt that many of them have ever been in a fight where Optimus or Megatron really led the charge. That sort of fight died with Cybertron," Kass explained slowly. "The chance to end the war died with Cybertron, because without a take-all battle on solid ground... it would never end. It would take forever for them to really kill each other completely, and a war built on exodus would demand that every single one of their enemies were dead."

She remembered Wheeljack and Bluestreak's stories, along with Jazz's, of the long war in space. Of how they had spent nearly the majority of the war fighting in deep space rather than on the planet they had all sacrificed so much for. Optimus and Megatron had rarely faced each other openly, there had simply never been any chance for a take-all battle. Megatron's disappearance, when he'd been trapped on Earth for thousands of years, had practically guaranteed a never ending battle between the two armies. None of the Cybertronians probably thought of it themselves, because it was just too grim, but they had been doomed to fight an eternal battle... until they had come together again on Earth.

Earth... was more than just a place to conquer, Kass realized. It was the place where they would finish what had been started a million years ago.

"Earth... has given them a place to fight. Finally, after all these millennia, their two armies can go head to head in a real battle on solid ground, with a real world to fight over," she told Wilkinson. Kass sighed. "I would be surprised if this doesn't end it once and for all."

The other human asked, still startled by the line of conversation, "End what?"

"The war." Kass shrugged and looked out the window again, into the pitch blackness. "I think that what happens here on Earth will decide their war, once and for all. Although it might just be wishful thinking."

They landed quietly. In fact, the whole base was scarily quiet when Kass disembarked and was shuffled off with Wilkinson and the rest of the mechanics toward a medium sized hangar. It was reinforced with only sheet metal that was a little rusty on the sides, and had a floor of dirt and rock. Kass grimaced at the state of the building she'd have to turn into a real medical bay. Ratchet would be furiously shouting at NEST for the poor conditions, but Kass simply made do with what they had.

They didn't have medical berths, just shipping containers long enough to hold a mech. There were two of them, even though they only had one real "medic." Kass shrank away from the civilian medic
band she had on her upper arm. Everyone on the team knew who and what she was, but Kass wished she could just do her job without being noticed. She would have enough stress as it was, trying to save lives she wasn't entirely sure she could save without people trying to acknowledge her doing so.

New Autobots had arrived shortly before her own arrival to Kandahar, an advance team sent from the Hyperion. The poor mechs had had the worst arrival yet, having to literally dodge past Nemesis in order to get to Earth in time. Kass marveled at their bravery, but also at their appearances. They'd had little time to pick their alt-modes from an array of rather poor quality cars left in the area, but their names were hastily picked as well: Hot Rod, Tracks, and Smokescreen. They hadn't even had time to decontaminate. Kass didn't really think it mattered, since the Decepticons they would encounter later wouldn't have bothered with it.

As she guided some supply specialists in where she needed equipment to be placed, one of the mechs really made an impression on her. Impressive, considering the distance and the mass of NEST soldiers between them.

But one of them was a Praxian. Kass was entranced by the wings on his back. She thought of Bluestreak immediately. She wondered if they knew each other. With their endangered ethnic status, she thought that they must. She hoped to tell Bluestreak later. For now…

Kass finished arranging her tools and left the other mechanics to get the rest of the equipment up and running properly. The hangar would allow for one or two mechs at best, but Kass hoped none would have to end up there. She crossed the dark tarmac toward where the mechs were. She could see NEST soldiers moving around the base and it was surprising how bright the whole place was, courtesy of the electricity.

Sideswipe saw her approach and waved. She smiled back tentatively, but kept her focus on the new mechs. Tracks didn't look particularly friendly, and Hot Rod was talking animatedly with NEST, British, and Afghan soldiers now, so Smokescreen was mostly alone, standing aside waiting. He and Mirage were in charge of battle plans, and Kass didn't want to distract him, but he didn't seem busy.

Moving past Sideswipe, Kass gazed up at Smokescreen. She forced herself to speak up.

"Excuse me….?"

Despite there being many humans nearby, Smokescreen immediately turned and his optics found Kass dozens of feet below. He seemed surprised.

"Ah… hello," he offered in an American accent, which was far more pronounced than anything Kass had heard before. He didn't seem like he was too interested in speaking to her, but she couldn't sense that he wanted her to leave either.

"What's your name?" Kass asked, politely. She stopped, realizing she was already being rude. "Oh, I mean, my name is Kassandra Hall."

"Smokescreen," the blue mech replied. He smiled faintly. "You the medic?"

He probably had identification files on all the NEST employees, even civilians like her. Kass nodded. "Yes. As much as I can be called that," she said. She tried to be friendly. "Welcome to Earth."

"Thanks," Smokescreen said, amused now. He peered at her curiously and seemed content to hold a conversation with her at least. "Studied under Ratchet, huh? Never had an organic medic before, but
I'm sure you'll do fine."

"I hope no one needs me," Kass replied wryly. She paused and peered back at him with the same curiosity. "You're a Praxian."

Smokescreen hesitated. Surprise flickered over his faceplates and his doorwings twitched. "You… know…?" he began, shocked that a human would know such words.

Kass had to chuckle. "My closest family is one. Bluestreak," she explained, relaxing a bit. She paused and added, "The one from the future, not the one from Hyperion."

She knew all the incoming Autobots would already have been prepped by Prowl about the existence of the survivors. After all, some of them were fighting alongside the Autobots. Smokescreen seemed to understand and the bemused curiosity faded into actual astonishment.

"…Oh, Primus, you're the time jumper. One of them," he said, optics huge. He crouched down and stared at her with open interest. Apparently, that hadn't been in her NEST file. "Wow. Well, then, especially nice meeting you."

Kass laughed. "I've met Prowl, too. Your doorwings give you away," she admitted, pointing at the panels on his back.

That made Smokescreen laugh as well. "Ha, I suppose they do!" The doorwings danced in show of his amusement.

Their conversation died like a droplet of water in the parched desert air when a blaring alarm shot over the base. Kass tensed up and looked for the attack of incoming Decepticons—but she realized the noise was simply a warning. Their enemies were sighted, but not there yet. Soldiers spread out like waves of water anyway, however, and Mirage called for the Autobots to prepare to move out to meet their enemies.

The inhuman klaxon echoed across her bones and made Kass shiver.

In front of her, the Praxian hadn't risen to the alarm, but he was staring off into the distance with a concentrated glare. After a few seconds, he turned back to her with a severe expression. "Don't worry, Kassandra," he said. "I'll make sure you get out of this alive."

Promises like those were dangerous and ultimately empty. Kass accepted it anyway with a smile that didn't quite match the terror in her gut.

"Call me Kass," she said, holding her head higher. "And thank you. I'll do the same for you."

Sooner than she wanted to think, she was running back to the med-bay, dodging phantom bullets when the sound of distant gunfire broke out across the desert air a mile away.

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Plumas, California
8:20 AM

They had about forty-five minutes of peace once the last convoy left in the helicopters. Danny had seen her friends off to their various teams and watched the planes and helicopters leave, sitting quietly alongside Arcee, Sam and Miles before she decided to go back inside. She couldn't do much, but Sam was happily preparing to go to his own job at the communications center. Danny didn't mind having Miles hang around camp; it gave her the chance to get to know him as well as introduce
him to their family a bit more. She didn't feel like she needed to ask anyone's permission to do that, really; he was technically Rachel's family, so that meant he was everyone's family, too.

"This is our family portrait," she said, handing him the wrinkled Polaroid they had of everyone together, including Wheeljack.

"Wow," Miles said, honestly interested. "You guys look horrible."

Danny laughed. "Yeah, I guess we do."

"We didn't look too bad, considering," Arcee mused, still caught up in the rather pleasant mood that had lasted for the last few days.

Danny had expected to sit around there for a bit with Arcee and Miles until she visited Wildrider a little bit later. He was recharging a lot more to heal faster, but Arcee warned it wouldn't speed the process up too much. He was adamant he would be ready to help when they finished that first fight. He seemed sure that the fight would end well for their side, so Danny tried to believe that, too.

But as it turned out, fate didn't plan for him to spend the day recharging, or for Danny to sit around telling family stories.

In a frightening blast of déjà vu, something exploded not that far from Hangar B. Danny was on her feet just as quickly as Arcee was, and both looked for the source of the explosion. Miles remained on the floor, looking utterly unprepared.

"What was that?" he asked, his fear stemming from the fact that he had never seen actual fighting in this war of theirs, Danny realized.

The poor teen would get a crash course in it, she realized, when one of their remaining Humvees went flying across the field before crashing into a pile of crates. With most of their supplies and vehicles elsewhere, there wasn't much left for it to crash into.

"Stay here!" Arcee ordered to them, before rushing toward the exit. Danny obeyed, mostly because she knew she had no weapons and didn't know which way to be running with Miles. She also realized Sam was somewhere on base, though if he was lucky, he was with soldiers.

If there were 'Cons attacking, they were in trouble. They only had Arcee and Bumblebee for mech support. The human soldiers wouldn't be able to help too much. Danny looked back to Miles, already planning a hurried escape. If she could at least get him to the forest they could use the trees as protection. It was cold and there weren't many leaves to give them cover, but it was their only hope. They would have to trust that their friends would think of the same thing.

"Get ready to move," she started to say, reaching for Miles.

And then…

She heard it. Miles heard it too, but he didn't recognize it. Danny recognized it as readily as she would Wheeljack's voice, or Barns'. At a distance, it might have sounded like the cry of a human. It wasn't.

A heart-stopping shriek ripped across the air and she heard soldiers open fire. Amid the gunfire, she could still hear it. Screeching, metallic howling—

A sleek silver form whipped out into the air in front of them, its single red optic honing in on targets out of sight.
"You have got to be kidding me," Danny said, shoulders sagging. Abruptly, she forced air of her lungs with a loud, "**DRONES!**"

That yell would be common to Arcee or Wildrider, but they were the only ones here who knew how to react to it. Miles gasped, but he probably didn't understand how to tell the difference between the fear of the drones and the fear of Decepticons. To Danny, those fears were very different things.

"**ARCEE!**" she screamed. She turned and grabbed Miles' arm, yanking him with more strength than her small form revealed. "We're going to the forest!"

She could only hope Arcee, who now had her guns out and was using them as readily as her speed, heard that shout. Right now, Danny could only do what she could alone, and that was to get out of the way with as many civilians as she could. She knew the presence of the drones had to be deliberate. The nearby nests had been taken care of, hadn't they? With Galvatron fighting the Autobots everywhere else in the world, maybe he had thought it necessary to attack their home base too.

Or maybe it wasn't Galvatron. Danny didn't want to think their other enemy was near, the Fallen. She focused on running down the hangar bay, hunting for a way outside that didn't bring them directly to the drones—

A roaring engine made her stop short, Miles nearly falling on top of her. They slid to a harsh stop just in time for Bumblebee to come flying in from the back entrance they were headed for. He transformed back to root mode, but not before depositing a very hassled Sam to his feet.

"There are drones everywhere out there," Bumblebee said without pause. He looked hurriedly between the three civilians. "We need to get you out, but we need to clear a path."

"I can fight," Danny said, knowing she sounded breathless. She was afraid, but not too afraid to fight. "Give me one of the blasters we had, or the grenades that Wheeljack made. I can fight, too!"

Bumblebee hesitated. Danny grit her teeth. They didn't have time for this.

"I've killed more of these things than you have," Danny said, daring to step closer, gesturing at herself firmly. "I *can* fight."

To his credit, Bumblebee didn't argue. He instead ordered the lot of them to run between the hangars themselves back toward the med-bay, where WJ had been studying their confiscated weapons. Danny went without question, the sounds of battle ravaging the air. She prayed Arcee would be alright, and she prayed that they could buy them all enough time.

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Sam had to hand it to their run of luck. While this turn of events reminded him unpleasantly of Soundwave's attack on the base months ago (the this-Soundwave, not the future-Soundwave), Sam didn't want to blame any of his Autobot friends for leaving the base and the rest of them without any means of defense, again. This time was even worse—they only had Bumblebee and Arcee now. He tried to think of the bright side of this situation: it wasn't the Decepticons attacking. Drones couldn't be as bad as a real mech, he thought.

He'd thought that foolishly, Sam discovered, once he, Miles and Danny took off running straight through the hangars. With the remaining NEST team, mostly those dedicated to communications, fighting the drones with Arcee, they had hoped they would have a clear shot for the med-bay. Bumblebee couldn't fit through the side door leading to Hangar C, so he had gone to the front,
hoping to waylay any drones that might slip inside to hunt the humans down. Sam watched his guardian leave fearfully and he prayed his friend would be safe.

Danny led the charge, moving forward with a severe expression that didn't match her usual upbeat personality. She ran in a crouch that Sam and Miles imitated, keeping their heads down as they went as quickly as possible toward Hangar C and the medical/science wing where the weapons were.

They got about ten feet when a gasp strangled in Danny's throat and she tried to fling herself into another row of shelves and office tables. Sam didn't see it until after he heard it. He saw Miles falling over himself trying to get out of the way after the first mechanical screech warned Sam to look up. A drone, weapons powering up, was no less than a few yards from them, headed their way from the front of the hangar.

"BEE!" Sam screamed, just before falling and trying to roll to the side. He slammed hard into a metal shelf leg and tried to ignore the shooting pain up his back at the contact. All he could do was strain to pinpoint where the hissing drone was, it had to be getting closer—

Precise gunfire made Sam's heart leap up into his throat, but after he managed to get his fumbling limbs in order and lift himself up off the cement, he could see the shots weren't headed toward him. He could see Bumblebee all the way down the hangar by the doors, shooting at a rigid pace, trying to get the drone's attention. It worked flawlessly; the silver beast shrieked in anger and shot back toward the Autobot, who retreated out to the open. Sam was terrified for his friend, but knew that Bumblebee was trying to keep the drones away from the humans. The least Sam could do was keep to the damn plan.

Gasping for air, he grabbed hold of the shelf and hauled himself upwards. He saw Miles and Danny already scrambling ahead and he stumbled after them. Adrenaline was still coursing through him, but his limbs felt overly heavy. He could see the other side of Hangar C, where a hallway led back to the medical and science wing. They were almost there. They just had to get into the stupid corridor—!

Outside the hangar, another explosion made all three teens dive for cover out of sheer habit. Sam decided he was allowed to blame people at this point, so he firmly decided to yell at Prowl later for nearly getting them all killed again—

A loud screech of metal—not the drones, but just a regular sound of metal creaking—made them all stumble to a stop behind a plaster divider that made up some offices that dotted the more open interior of Hangar C, in front of the actual walled off rooms. They couldn't see the airfield directly, but Sam dared to peek out slowly to figure out what the sound was. If he wasn't mistaken, he thought he heard footsteps. Loud ones.

Had—had one of the Autobots returned? Arcee had a wheel, and Bumblebee was no where near that loud when he walked. Sam almost had hope that they weren't alone fighting the drones.

And then, out walked a three-story tall silver Seeker who almost too calmly grabbed a drone out of the air and ripped it apart with his bare hands.

Sam's eyes squinted slowly. Oh… Oh, no. No. No, no, no—

Danny was beside him, staring out at the same sight. "…Is that Starscream?" she asked hoarsely.

"Oh, God, we're going to die," Sam whimpered, clutching the plastic divider weakly.

"WHY DID THEY LEAVE HIM ON BASE WITH US? !" Miles shrieked, not even caring about exposing their hiding spot. Starscream stomped past their hangar without even looking their way.
Sam's heart was like a war drum at that point.

"Shit, who cares, just go!" he shouted back. He could see the sign indicating that the next door led to the med-bay. They were so close.

Danny suddenly grabbed his arm, looking oddly determined. "Well, why not—?" She suddenly gasped. "GET DOWN!"

Despite being incredibly tiny, Danny had real strength. She threw Sam to the ground and he faintly heard Miles drop similarly. He didn't even need to ask why they had to duck; gun fire shot over them and Sam heard the shriek of another drone. He managed to glance up and see a flash of silver, coming closer, but it wasn't on top of them yet.

"Move!" Danny screamed. She didn't wait for them before rushing to her feet. "Just go, just go, don't stop!"

"BEE!" Sam shouted, though he took off after Danny. "WE NEED HELP HERE!"

They ran faster than Sam had even believed he could run. He had never been very athletic, but this was like, the fifth time he had been sent running for his life. He was almost a pro at it. Sneakers sliding over the sleek flooring, the three humans did their best to outrun the monster flying through the air like some kind of snake. Sam didn't know if they would make it. They had just passed the communications center and he could already hear the drone whipping closer and closer.

He didn't want to die like this. Sam grit his teeth and ran even faster. He would not die like this—

"Wait!" Miles cried, so suddenly, it made Sam flinch. He had stopped running and was, from the looks of it, attacking the wall. "Help me with this!"

Sam almost tripped when he stopped running, heart racing wildly. "What are you doing?" he asked, horrified. They had to move, not stop. He almost started to yell at Miles, until he realized that his best friend was not just attacking the wall. He was elbow-deep in the two-foot gap that started at the floor and went all the way up over the ceiling of the corridor they were in.

Images flickered across Sam's mind. Reconstruction. The communications room down the hall had been damaged by Soundwave's attack. Hoist and Jolt had been working to rebuild the hallway and had almost completed it. The exposed wall segment that went up and over the hallway down to the other side had seemed so unimportant this whole time, all its bundles of wires simply part of the background just like a seamless wall would have been.

Miles didn't think it was something to ignore now, however. "Cables—they're hot, still electrified—drop them down!" he was shouting. He found something to hold onto and began to run the other way with it. It was tied to a portion of the wires that seemed to go up the entire length of the massive hallway wall, perhaps even to the ceiling.

"We can't pull that down!" Sam exclaimed, now alarmed. He could see the drone at the end of the hallway. They didn't have time—!

"HELP ME, SAM!" Miles screamed, ignoring logic. He kept pulling, even as more and more sections came untied and he could pull further and further across the width of the hallway.

The drone was almost there, but Sam dove for the wires to help pull faster. They didn't have a way to fight back, but maybe, if they distracted it long enough, Danny could go for the weapons. She was no longer in sight, so Sam decided to simply throw common sense to the wind and go with Miles' plan. With their combined pulling, more and more of the ties broke away, clearly not installed with
this sort of treatment in mind.

And then, the desired effect. Sam gasped and let go of his part of the wires in order to grab hold of Miles to pull him back. Like a cascade of black and gray string, the once-neat array of wires came tumbling down from the gap in the ceiling. They swung down almost like a limp curtain, right into the drone's oncoming path.

Whether Miles had thought ahead to consider the fact that simply hitting the drone with live wires wasn't enough, Sam didn't know. Probably, the blond man hadn't considered it. He had probably assumed that the plastic-encased wires would electrocute the drone on contact, though that was completely illogical, when Sam thought about it in hindsight. The plastic insulated the wires just as they were supposed to when anyone touched them, mech or human.

But luck was on their side at that moment. The drone dove straight through the curtain of wires, both thin and thick, black and gray, without stopping its rapid weaving pace through the air. It had screeched in triumph when it saw them standing right there, but that screech soon turned into a howl when its razor sharp limbs tore into the wires—and sent a Cybertronian-level amount of electricity coursing through the drone's metallic frame.

Briefly, Sam thought he would have to compliment Hoist for his idea of merging Cybertronian and human technology to make the base run better. Ingenious.

The drone shrieked and thrashed around in the mess of wires. It wouldn't be stuck there for long, since it kept cutting up the wires with its body, but that only sent more electric sparks into the air. Sam and Miles had managed to stumble into the wall nearest to the med-bay entrance, watching in stunned silence.

It didn't last long. The electricity probably was nothing more than a rather rude slap to the face. The drone broke free of the wires and surged forward. If it could feel emotion, it was probably pissed as hell, Sam thought in a flash of terror.

"Holy—!" Miles began, trying to duck hopelessly out of the way.

"HEY!"

Sam had enough time to look for the source of the angry shout, as did the drone, even with its circuits fried. Without much prompt, a horrendous boom—it rattled his bones, honestly—echoed across the hallway. The blast rippled through the air, startling Sam, before it slammed into the drone right in front of them. Shrieking, it was sent flying straight back into the electrical mess hanging from the ceiling and the whole thing went up sparking.

Sam ducked to avoid looking at the bright flashing, but that wasn’t all. Several repetitive shots were fired and Sam had to hit the ground, his whole body feeling the rattling shocks through the air itself. The drone's shrieking died off after the third shot, but there were two more before the hallway fell utterly silent.

Standing in the middle of the hallway holding what looked like a toy science-fiction laser gun, Danny watched the body of the drone intensely for a long minute, obviously ready to fire again if it so much as twitched. Sam gulped and shakily stood up, ready to move again.

But to their relief, the drone remained still and dead. "Man, that felt awesome," Danny said abruptly. She looked at both Miles and Sam. "You guys okay?"

Sam was too busy gaping at the weapon in her hands to really speak. "…yeah," Miles said for him,
just as astonished.

Danny didn't pay their shock any heed. She turned right back around and dashed toward WJ's empty lab, just a few yards down from the med-bay.

"I'll be right out!" she called back, disappearing into the dark lab. "We're lucky this was like right in the cabinet. But where did he put the—oh, right!"

Before he could even take the chance to consider going after her, Sam was suddenly nose to nose with a frantic Miles. "Sam, what are we gonna do?" the blond man asked, eyes terrorized.

It would have been so easy to just say, "Wait and hide here." The drones were hunting movement, or at least that's what Sam assumed, so if they hid, maybe they could avoid detection while inside the depths of the building.

But Sam had never been one to run and hide. He wasn't brave, or heroic in anyway, but he'd developed the habit of running (screaming) toward danger. He counted that as sort of good. It made their crippling uselessness seem a little less, at any rate.

"Well..." He looked toward where Danny was making a racket looking for her weapons. "If we can use any of those weapons, we should. To help."

He wasn't sure if they'd be able to do anything constructive outside, but Bumblebee was out there, as well as their other friends. Sam had to go out there.

Miles stared at him blankly, probably reeling at everything being tossed his way. "...Right," the teen said, voice quaking. He looked utterly unsure of himself and the situation. "Sam, I don't know what to do."

"Easy. If something shoots at you, you run, or you fight back," Sam replied. He stopped when he saw Miles wince at his bluntness. Sam took a mental step back and tried to be understanding of Miles' situation. "Seriously, that was what got me through Mission City."

It was easy to feel bad for Miles, who had never been in a situation like this before. He must be terrified. Sam wished he could just tell Miles to stay here, but he knew his human friend would hear none of that.

"Jesus." Miles let out of a puff of shaky air and clasped his hands together. He stared at them in his own odd form of gathering inner control. "Okay. Okay. Miles da Man, you got this..."

Sam glared at his friend. "Never call yourself that again," he said, not feeling particularly nice at the moment. He saw Danny headed their way from WJ's lab. "Hey, Danny—?"

She didn't even stop. "Here!" she said, throwing a small object at him. Sam barely caught it, and when he did, he could feel how heavy the round, metal thing was. "They're grenades, with an imbedding drill shell. Throw it at the drones and try to hit it. When it touches the shell, it'll latch on like a leech, giving it time to explode while the drone is flailing around in the air. It's not as powerful as a plasma shot, but trust me, this will bring one of 'em down." Danny rushed off down the hall, hoisting her concussion blaster and a grenade in her arms. "Follow me!"

The two young men standing in her wake followed her with their eyes, not exactly sure if they should follow.

"She's like an Arabic Chihuahua with explosive weapons," Sam said, wary. He trusted she knew what she was doing, but...
"Kass said she takes after her dad," Miles said, strained.

Sam gathered his nerves and nodded. "Come on," he replied, starting to move forward. They had to do what they could to help. The explosions weren't going away outside.

A loud creak behind them made both humans yell and jump to the side. Sam had thought, for one heart-stopping moment, that it was the drone getting back up. But the dead monster was still on the ground where they had left it. The noise had come from inside the med-bay, not the hallway—

Neck craning back, Sam reluctantly looked upwards at the tall figure now looming behind them.

Wildrider, looking just as bad as Sam remembered, was holding onto the doorframe of the med-bay with an expression fit to kill. Beside him, Miles gasped.

"Out of vay, little humans," the red-and-black mech said darkly, walking out determinedly even with the limp.

Sam stared up at the passing mech, mildly horrified. "Wildrider…" he began, not sure if he could or should reprimand the wounded alien. There were still huge unpainted weld marks all over Wildrider's frame. Surely he wasn't thinking of running out to fight while injured—?

Apparently, Wildrider didn't care much for staying out of the fight. He grinned madly as he sidestepped the two humans. "Time to play vith old friends!" the mech announced, fingers flexing wildly at his side. "Иди сюда, друзья!"

0000

Wiesbaden Army Airfield, Germany
5:00 PM

Wiesbaden was a resort town near Frankfurt and Mainz. Barns had been horrified to learn they would soon turn an area containing over two million civilians into a warzone, but it wasn't like NEST had a choice. WAAF, as the nearby Wiesbaden Army Airfield was known, had been the base closest to a huge number of drone locations. It was a logical place, considering that it was home to the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade, which was in charge of providing intel to the U.S. army in both Europe and Africa. Wiesbaden and a large portion of Mainz and Frankfurt had been evacuated days before, when the drone nests were identified, but Barns still felt nervous as they got closer and closer to the German ground.

He had been assigned to the same plane that Lennox and his team were traveling in, but up in the air Barns had felt very alone. He had calmly told his friends back at Plumas that he was lucky to be going in with Thundercracker and Jazz, plus Hoist, but truthfully, he wouldn't be seeing any of the mechs anytime soon. Thundercracker flew in on his own and would be sent to do most of the forward scouting missions and ultimately engage the drone swarms directly. Jazz and Hoist had flown to Ramstein with another group of human soldiers, and would be joining later.

That was it, at least for the time being. Prowl had sent another message through their heavily encrypted network that the Hyperion would be sending reinforcements as soon as possible. The reinforcements to Kandahar had already landed, so that was good. Barns trusted NEST to do a good job at handling the drones, but he was incredibly uneasy about only having three mechs on hand. He prayed fiercely for his friends to get through this okay.

As for himself… Barns had readily agreed to work with WAAF's intelligence command to help them anticipate and organize drone location information. It was a simple job that Barns hoped he wouldn't
mess up. Many lives depended on them, even though they sat safely back on base while the soldiers fought miles away.

Lennox had taken it upon himself to get Barns where he needed to be, despite the Major's own obviously hectic schedule. Barns listened to the commander's explanations of who to listen to and who to report to (a Commander Sergeant Major named Adrian Young), feeling more and more out of sync with reality. His gaze kept slipping from Lennox's face as they waited, Lennox impatiently, for Major Young to meet them and take Barns to the intel center.

His silence and apparent melancholy distracted Lennox eventually. "What's wrong, Barns?" the Major asked, frowning.

The first reaction Barns had was to deny there was a problem. But then he caught sight of a highway, far off base. He imagined cars driving on it, and in the cars, people. To the other side of the empty airfield, he could see Wiesbaden, and all of those tiny little houses.

Everything felt so wrong, he mused.

"I feel…" Barns began, but he ended up trailing off.

Swept up in the background noise of the base moving, Barns almost stopped thinking completely. He stared off for a moment and had to forcefully draw back mentally to where he was standing; Lennox was watching him carefully now.

"It is like I have come home," Barns said. He wasn't sure why, but he smiled. "But it is so strange here. As if I am watching strangers move in my own home's hallways."

All of the soldiers were one thing. But he had seen the cities under them on the plane, seen cars and buses and trains going about their business. He could see civilians and soldiers both on the base. There were people everywhere, in a land Barns had considered home. A land he had traveled through his entire life. A land that had been empty and dead.

"…You okay?" Lennox asked, breaking into his thoughts quietly. He looked concerned, which Barns didn't need.

"Yes." Gathering himself, Barns nodded at the human commander and forced a smile. "Tell me what you need me to do."

It didn't matter if this place was different than what he had grown up knowing. It was still Europe, still his home, and there were so many more people there to protect. He would do what he could to help them, no matter what.

Lennox nodded and seemed to understand that Barns wasn't in danger of emotional collapse. Major Young thankfully appeared soon after, and directed Barns to their intelligence center, toward the front of the base. He would be helping their strategy officers interpret the active data they were receiving at a constant rate of incoming Decepticon forces over European air space, in addition to their own discoveries of drones on land, which was their primary objective here.

Barns soon became enveloped by his duties, teaching the commanders overseeing the data gathering operation to understand the drones' behavior patterns, so they knew how to direct their soldiers to attack the nests. The threat of battle and attack never went away, but as Barns gazed over maps and plotted more and more drone locations and perceived paths of motion, his confidence stabilized.

Forty minutes later, however, everything changed.
Screaming.
Explosions.
Heart racing.

_Yup_, Danny thought as she ran between metal crates for cover to avoid being blasted to pieces by incoming gunfire, it was just like home.

She caught up to Arcee by chance just outside of Hangar B. They took cover behind an overturned armored Humvee and took turns firing at the drones overhead. They had a group of soldiers to their right, firing from the doorway of the hangar, and together, they managed to push the drones back, almost herding them away from their side. It was difficult, but every time one got through their wave of bullets, Danny made sure to hit the incoming drone away, back toward more of the gunfire.

This process required more people and firepower than they'd had in their old world, and would have taken far too long, leaving them open for attacks by more than one drone swarm. But now, they could afford to take the slow route, which would be their only hope at fighting off this large swarm, really. If they weren't careful, they would be swamped if they let the drones dive at them en-masse.

After shooting one of the strays out of the air with a lucky hit, straight into the hangar roof, Danny noticed two incoming figures from Hangar C. Sam and Miles were running full speed toward her and Arcee, holding their grenades like they were about to go off. Danny knew they wouldn't stay hidden, so she was glad she had given them some kind of weapon, even if they had no idea how to use them.

"Sam! Miles, over here!" she called. She waved at them furiously as they ran toward their little debris pile.

Miles was an absolute wreck and almost fell on his face trying to scramble low toward them. He found cover behind the remains of a burnt out container unit and was gaping at the swarm of drones in horror. Sam managed to get a bit closer to Danny's location and, despite looking just as out of place, seemed more determined to use his grenade.

Danny went to show him how to throw it (which she figured would have been the most horrible training done in thirty seconds ever; Wheeljack would be appalled), but something stopped her. Namely, someone caught her eye, all the way back at Hangar C again.

Marching out like he was his own one-mech army, Wildrider strode rapidly toward their location, opening fire on the drone swarm as well. Danny gaped at the sight of her battered friend, whom she was very certain was not supposed to be upright, let alone attacking the drones.

She didn't even have to warn Arcee, because the femme turned around in bewilderment at the sudden added firepower. That shock turned immediately into rage when Arcee saw Wildrider walking their way, a limp still noticeable in his gait.

"WILDRIDER! ARE YOU INSANE? !" the pink transformer howled, taking time away from shooting at the drones to give the larger mech a lethal expression.

Wildrider scoffed and took his turn to fire confidently toward the swarm, which was forced apart by
the attack. "Is that question?" he asked, not amused. He sounded better, at least, but that could have just been the battle lust.

Arcee didn't back down. "I am going to murder you!" she shouted, whipping the other direction to fire at a drone that tried to slip up to their side. "You're barely in one piece as it is! Your spark case has barely healed!"

"I can fight!" Wildrider argued. He threw his cannon arm up to fire. "Medic enabled weapons in last visit! See!"

"Wildrider—you are so stupid!" Arcee continued to scream, almost too angry to speak coherently. She ducked more incoming fire from an overconfident drone that soon came under fire from the line of soldiers to their left.

"Rider, what the hell are you doing out here and not the med-bay? !" Danny demanded, horrified. She still couldn't understand how he was even standing, let alone stumbling out into this mess—

Wildrider sent her a startling glare. "Ooh, I don't know? he began, sarcasm potent. "Maybe because drones are tearing med-bay apart? !"

Sam grimaced and peeked out at the drones. "Guys, maybe we should focus on the monsters—"

"GO BACK INSIDE!" Arcee shrieked, shooting something beyond their position.

"NO!" Wildrider snapped back.

Danny screamed. "HEADS UP!" she shouted, pointing to their flank.

Both aliens immediately turned and opened fire on another drone trying to sneak up behind them. Danny turned to the left and shot at another one. They were slowly cutting down the numbers of drones, but they just kept coming. This was worse than what they were used to, but at least now they had proper ammo and back up.

Sort of.

Danny gasped when Starscream reappeared from behind Hangar A and casually grabbed the base of another drone right out of the air, ripping it into two parts. He did this in a methodical manner, like he was just going through a routine. He was either brave, or utterly trusted his own strength. Another drone screeched and dove low for the Seeker's leg, slicing into the metal. Starscream's demeanor changed then and he angrily crushed the drone. Danny could then see other injuries on his back, so he clearly hadn't escaped unscathed.

Beside her, Danny knew both Arcee and Wildrider were now very aware of the Seeker's presence and had stopped firing.

"…What the hell?" Wildrider asked, more stunned than afraid of the Seeker.

He was the only mech to be that calm. "Starscream's escaped? !" Arcee exclaimed, horrified. A dozen yards away, Bumblebee had stopped and was gawking at Starscream in alarm.

Danny shook her head. "He's helping us!" she exclaimed, pointing as the Seeker took a large container and hurled it at a pack of drones, crushing at least three, scattering the rest. "Look!"

As much as he was dangerous and still a potential enemy, Danny realized they needed Starscream's strength. He didn't seem to be afraid of the drones. Maybe because he knew so much about them,
because of what he had stolen from Galvatron? She wasn't sure, but she was sure that having a Seeker helping them while Thundercracker was away wasn't something to get angry over. She'd take any help they could get.

She was alone in that thinking, sadly. "Primus, this is out of control!" Arcee said, angry. She rolled forward with her arms now raised at the incoming Seeker, who finally seemed to notice the Autobots and NEST team. "STARScream! Stand down immediately!"

Starscream walked toward them at a leisurely pace, ignoring the drones still in the air. He smirked at the tiny femme, who fell under his shadow quite quickly once the distance between them was closed. Wildrider growled lowly and only then pointed his guns toward Starscream, ready to jump to Arcee's defense. Danny reluctantly did the same.

"My, do you really think that's such a good idea, femme?" Starscream began, almost coy. He smirked arrogantly. "Looks like you could use my help."

"How did you get out of the brig? !" Arcee demanded, just as Bumblebee rushed up and added his own weapons to point at Starscream. Both Autobots probably stood no chance against the giant Seeker, even without his guns, but Danny admired their bravery.

"You call that a brig? " Starscream laughed. "Ha! I heard the explosions and thought it was my former associates paying you a visit. I had every intention of getting out before they killed all of you insects." His expression turned sly again once he gazed out at the drones whipping through the air, trying to get through the NEST soldiers' defenses. They needed help. "However… it appears this is quite the different battlefield."

"Are you going to help us—?" Danny started to ask, before gasping at the sight of several drones looping over the soldiers in a sudden, coordinated maneuver. "Whoa!"

Without warning, the drones had surged, a good ten of them shooting over the line of soldiers. One of them shot the Humvee until it exploded, sending debris everywhere. Danny refocused on them, knowing they had more important priorities than a Seeker who might or might not betray them later. For now, Starscream seemed to be content to attack the drones. The Autobots suddenly realized this and turned to attack the drones instead. The fight took off once again.

Beside her now, Sam was looking around at the airfield, gazing upwards in horror. "Danny, how do I use this? !" he asked, frantically holding his grenade up.

"Just throw it!" she shouted as he obediently turned back toward their enemies.

Sam threw it as hard as he could. Danny had to admit, he could throw farther than she ever could. He unfortunately missed the drone entirely and the grenade embedded itself into the container unit right underneath it. Before they could consider that a failure, however, the grenade exploded. The explosive force knocked the drone to the side, its limbs flailing as its equilibrium was disrupted. Danny took that moment to shoot it twice with the concussion blaster. The distance lessened the impact of a single hit, but two times was enough to hurl the drone to the ground thrashing. NEST soldiers finished it off with rapid-fire guns.

Turning, Danny could see Bumblebee blast apart several more drones alongside Arcee and Wildrider, who also followed Starscream's example and started to rip the drones out of the air. It was dangerous to grab hold of the drones with their bare hands, but it was the quickest way. Danny helped by blasting the drones to the ground for the mechs to smash easier. Slowly, they were hacking their way through the drone numbers—
Miles screamed and Danny turned around so fast her neck hurt. Miles had thrown his grenade haphazardly into the air at a drone that had snuck around behind them. The grenade flew far to the left, useless, and Miles screamed again when the drone struck out toward them. Sam dove forward, to grab Miles back, and Danny almost had her gun pointing the right way, but was terrified for a short moment that she wouldn't be fast enough—

And then, without prompt, Starscream stomped into view and simply ripped the drone in two. He was bleeding more now, and his irritation over his injuries was clear when he threw the dead drone away furiously. He barely paid the humans on the ground any heed, even as the three of them gaped upwards in shock.

"Starscream..." Sam breathed, eyes huge. Behind them, Bumblebee and Arcee had rushed up, too late to intervene themselves.

Almost but not quite ignoring the human, Starscream hissed in displeasure. "Those things are even worse than I was told," he spat, as if it was their fault. "And Galvatron wants to control these beasts? An interesting prospect, had you not already discovered their weaknesses. Now they are just annoyances." He stopped complaining when he saw Sam, Danny and Bumblebee watching him intensely. "What?"

Sam swallowed nervously. "...Thanks..." he managed to say, the word audibly difficult to pronounce. Danny couldn't blame him.

She was stunned to realize the fighting was slowing down. Turning, she could see Wildrider making vicious work out of the last of the flying drones. The soldiers were clearing up three more on the ground. Finally, the skies were mostly clear.

"As if I did anything for your sake. Ha!" Starscream barked, sneering nastily. He pointed at Sam with uncomfortable familiarity. "But I know for a fact your Autobot friends would kill me if I stood by and did nothing, useless saps that they are. You owe me."

At that, Danny scowled angrily. "Considering the fact you already owed the Autobots for not leaving your aft to be murdered by Galvatron, let's call it even, birdbrain," she snapped, channeling a little bit of Rachel and not caring if she was rude. Starscream didn't deserve manners, even if he did help them out.

Starscream's razor sharp attention turned to her and he snarled at her. Danny glared back, even if her heart did skip a beat. She heard Wildrider growl and start to move forward to intervene, but luckily, Bumblebee interrupted the fight.

"Enough!" the yellow scout shouted. He sent Starscream a severe look, who sneered back. "You remain where you are. You are still a prisoner. Now..."

Slowly, Bumblebee edged away from the group, seemingly distracted. That was almost a cue for the tension to ebb slightly. The drones were dead or dying, and she couldn't see any more coming their way in the sky. Danny could hear her rattling breath louder now and all the mechs, even Starscream, gradually came down from their battle modes and seemed exhausted. Poor Miles had collapsed yards away by a barrel and didn't seem to be getting up any time soon.

"Bee?" Sam asked, weary. He sat down slowly onto the ground, wincing slightly once he settled on the cement. Danny wanted to join him, but she thought she might fall over completely if she did anything but stand straight.

"I need to call Prime," Bumblebee replied. He lifted a hand to his helm and added grimly, "Let's
hope they've had our share of luck as well."

"Tell him I quit," Sam offered before letting his head hit against the cement with a thud.

End Chapter 43.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Kass gets more action than she ever wanted, the folks down South run into trouble, and Optimus finally gets to see his darling brother.

A/Ns:
- Keep in mind, this story is happening in 2009, so the United States is still in both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.
- Smokescreen has a Brooklyn accent, for reference.
- The drones are so rude.
- When I was writing this, I sort of forgot Starscream was there like these guys did. Oops.
- Just a couple of weeks ago (June 14th, 2012), Wiesbaden Army Airfield was renamed Lucius D. Clay Kaserne, after General Lucius Clay, commander in chief of the US Forces in Germany after WWII. When the Soviet Union blocked all access to West Berlin, Clay ordered US forces to start the Berlin Airlift and ensured that it continued until the Soviet Union lifted the Blockade. He retired from the Army shortly after the blockade ended.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

It's all fighting and injuries until somebody decides to crash the party. Uh oh. Also, I apologize for the time zone jumping, but rest assured, the fighting is all happening at once, regardless of what the clocks tell you.

Hey guys, this one was 25 pages. I think we just backtracked to Introductions-land or something.

Thank you, Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Los Angeles
8:32 AM PST

The first half hour of conflict had developed as expected, with no causalities on either side. Optimus had anticipated this, as had Prowl. The United States Air Force had successfully surprised those enemies who approached by air. The NEST forces on the ground had only had to tangle with the Seekers briefly before the Air Force took over, launching an impressive counter attack that sent the Seekers scrambling.

One of the Seekers had managed to hit Cliffjumper badly enough that he needed field dressings, however, so the ground team had pulled back temporarily for Mikaela to give him a quick patch. She worked fearlessly under the pressure, but when Optimus approached them on the field (dragging Cliffjumper all the way back to the airport terminal had proved to be too time consuming), he could tell his team was still under immense anxiety. The Air Force's success only made it more obvious that worse attacks were undoubtedly headed their way.

To Optimus' dismay, that time or relative calm ended far too early. He'd barely turned to Skyfire, who had landed to clear the skies for the Air Force jets that were to engage the remaining Seekers, when Epps reappeared from his communications truck, raising the alarm.

"Plumas is under attack!"

All at once, everyone stopped what they were doing, including watching out for their enemies, and spun around to find the human "What? !" Optimus exclaimed, stunned.

"Drones, lots of them, swarming the base—!" Epps explained, probably repeating something from the earpiece he had on. He looked alarmed enough to make everyone present fearful for those on the base. "Prime, we gotta get back there, now!"

"Who's there?" another soldier beside him asked, brow furrowed.
A stifled human gasp from near Cliffjumper was audible. "Oh, God, Sam," Mikaela whispered, eyes wide with fear.

Epps was trying to pay attention to whatever he was getting from his communications network. "Just Arcee, Bumblebee, and Squad 2. Wildrider's there, but he's still in intensive care, isn't he?" he asked. He suddenly cursed loudly. "Shit, the civilians—Danny, Witwicky, that Miles kid—!

Optimus knew they couldn't waste time then. "Epps, send some of your troops back to Plumas now! We cannot let Galvatron force our attention from him." He was already aware of more Cybertronian signatures headed their way from the north.

"What about Plumas?" Prowl demanded, doorwings up.

What indeed. Turning, Optimus saw their only Autobot flier standing there, looking a little surprised, but not overly worried for the people back at Plumas. "Skyfire, you must return to Plumas to evacuate those remaining there," he instructed, knowing the shuttle would be able to handle that transport easily. It would be the fastest way.

To his surprise, the order was not met with much enthusiasm. "Prime, I am needed for this battle," the shuttle replied, optics narrowed.

"Are you an Autobot, or aren't you?" Prowl demanded, glaring. Optimus tried to withhold his own irritation at the refusal, knowing Skyfire had other priorities. This was still an Autobot controlled field, however, and Skyfire claimed to be an Autobot.

"Yes," Skyfire admitted, his cool gaze shifting from Prowl up to Prime carefully. "But my orders do not come from you. They have never come from you. I never had the luxury of such a commander." He became more agitated under Optimus' glare. "I must be here, for when Soundwave returns. Galvatron's destruction is our top priority. It must be, Prime!"

"But what about Sam? !" Mikaela exclaimed, panicked. They didn't have time for this.

His own fears rising, Optimus turned to the human in charge. "Epps—!" he started, meaning to ask if there were any other aircraft they could send quickly.

"Wait!" one of the other communications specialists on the edge of the truck shouted, earning their attention. "I have an incoming call from Autobot Bumblebee."

It was a good sign for it to be one of their own calling, although Optimus found himself irritated by the fact that he couldn't contact Bumblebee directly. As part of Prowl's plan, they were hiding the identity of several of their "surprise" soldiers, such as Optimus himself. They couldn't risk using their own internal communications links, because the Decepticons had cracked their encryption long ago, so the Autobots were forced to use heavily encrypted human channels. "Patch it through," he ordered, and the human complied.

"Optimus, sir!" Bumblebee's voice came through the tiny radio phone on the truck ledge.

Optimus knelt close to the microphone the soldier held up for him, frowning. "Bumblebee, report."

"We're alright. No one was seriously harmed," the scout replied almost immediately. He sounded harried, but not overly anxious. "The drones have been neutralized."

Optics wide from his position on the ground, Cliffjumper seemed impressed. "What? Really?"

"We were able to defeat the swarm, which numbered at nearly thirty," Bumblebee continued.
"Plumas is clear, sir."

"Are you certain?" Optimus asked, his worry fading slightly. The idea that the base would be targeted while they were away had crossed their minds; to be safe they had cleared out all of the nests nearby, and Prowl had calculated that there was no strategic advantage in such an attack by the Decepticons. But all of their prevention had been for naught, it seemed.

"Yes." Bumblebee sounded grim, despite the victory. "This was most likely an attempt to divert your attention from Los Angeles."

"Most likely," Epps agreed, looking less grim.

Optimus also agreed, as did Prowl. "...Very well," Optimus replied at length. He leaned closer to the microphone, knowing they didn't have much time for this distraction as it was. "Bumblebee, evacuate the civilians regardless. Take them into the forest, as far as you can away from the base."

"Wildrider is still injured," Bumblebee began, but there was a noticeable click on the transmission, and then an unexpected voice joined him.

"I CAN FIGHT JUST FINE!"

Optimus, Prowl, and Cliffjumper drew back in surprise, while Epps looked a little uneasy.

"Wildrider?" he asked, surprised.

Despite having been berth-bound the last time they had seen the notoriously unhinged mech, Wildrider seemed upbeat now. "Ve okay, ve okay! Ve vill leave base, no problem," he said quickly.

"You are an idiot," Arcee snapped over the line. "Starscream has also been sent back to the brig."

Immediately, everyone surrounding the radio blanched. "BACK to the brig?" Prowl repeated, only a little horrified. Optimus resisted the urge to curse.

"Hey, he actually helped, believe it or not," Bumblebee replied sounding mildly disgruntled over that fact. They couldn't hear Starscream, since his radio had been disabled, but it was difficult to imagine him just standing around with the rest of them. Had he really helped?

"Dear God," Epps muttered, head in his hands.

Optimus frowned deeply. "Bumblebee, you must still try to lead the civilians from the base, including Starscream," he said. They had to make sure their remaining Plumas team and its other occupants were alright during the rest of the day's battle. They couldn't be sidetracked.

"But, sir, he may try to escape," Bumblebee warned of Starscream.

"To where? His flight's been disabled and he has nowhere to go," Prowl interrupted, doorwings twitching irritably. "If anything, we can't let him remain alone on base unguarded. There is sensitive material there."

"Ratchet's gonna have seizures over this," Cliffjumper muttered as Mikaela continued to hastily finish the patch job, the panic mostly over.

What a mess. "Fine," Optimus said, nodding. He turned back to the radio. "Bumblebee, you have your orders."

"Yes, sir," the scout replied before the line ended, and just in time.
Engines gunning, Jolt came flying up to their position in his alt-mode. Trailbreaker was still back at the front with the human soldiers, who began to shout orders among themselves. Something was happening.

"Optimus!" Jolt shouted over another distant explosion as the Americans pressed back on the Seekers again. "The fliers are engaged still, but we have grounders approaching!"

Beside him, Skyfire rumbled and transformed his arm into a formidable looking cannon. Taking his example, Optimus unsheathed his sword and turned to face his remaining soldiers. Mikaela hopped down off of Cliffjumper just in time for the red mech to stand and join the other mechs.

"Autobots!" Optimus called, rallying them for battle.

"My squad, with me! Cover the 'Bots!" Epps shouted, with equal fervor. "Move!"

The humans did their part and Epps led his ground team forward, diving into a military Humvee that just barely slowed down long enough for him to climb on. The humans went slightly to the left of the 'Bots who headed toward the edge of the airfield. There were already NEST soldiers at the front lines, firing at the Decepticons who landed boldly in front of them, clearly not expecting the humans to be worthy opponents. The sabot rounds proved otherwise, and the Decepticons were forced to fire upon the humans, giving the Autobots just enough time to launch into the fray.

Trailbreaker was closest and, after disposing of his force field around some of the humans, tore into the nearest 'Con with his bare hands, yanking the flier away from the soldiers. The other Decepticon had started to turn to aid his companion, but that gave Optimus the chance to reach out and impale the flier straight through the chassis. The violence was quick and brutal, but their war had long since removed the luxury of fighting to capture rather than the full out destruction they were forced to engage in now.

Toward the highway, three more fliers landed and fired across the airfield at them, tearing into the tarmac. The distance prevented NEST from continuing forward in a similar hard hitting attack, but luckily, that wasn't necessary.

Diving out from behind falsely abandoned vehicles yards behind the fliers, NEST-trained Rangers opened fire on the exposed fliers' backs. Roaring, the Decepticons whirled around to attack them, but in their haste, missed another important key player free falling their way.

Skyfire landed harshly between them, and gave them neither mercy nor time to react. He grabbed hold of one mech's shoulder and drew him close to slam his blast-ready cannon straight into the underside of his chassis. He blew through the mech's spark chamber and shoved away from the graying corpse with a single sharp shove. By the time the second mech managed to bring his own weapon up, the Autobot had already grabbed hold of the mech's offending arm and crushed his transformed wrist, mangling the gun while the mech howled in pain. Trying to get away was useless; Skyfire's immense size gave him the advantage, and he quickly finished the Decepticon off.

::Push them south toward El Segundo!:: Prowl ordered over the comm. He was firing calmly at a Seeker that was trying to get close to their position. Ultimately he was pushed back by the combined firepower from the NEST forces below. ::Trailbreaker, cover Cliffjumper and Epps' team, they're under fire from several grounders making their way in from the East.::

::On it:: the dark mech replied, transforming to catch up to the other half of their main squad. The men who had surprised the fliers near the highway joined up with the Autobots still present.

::Air Force says more fliers are en-route, boss.:: Jolt added, now further down the highway. ::They
think it's Galvatron::

::What's their ETA?:: Prowl demanded.

Optimus frowned behind his mask. This was what they needed. His presence among the Autobots would be known among the Decepticon forces by this point, so it didn't matter where Galvatron was headed. The Decepticon leader would come to find him, no matter where he was on the field.

::I will go back toward the southern border,: Optimus announced. ::We will keep Galvatron toward that area and hopefully that will draw the rest of the fighting toward our location. Keep the 'Cons to the south. Do not go past the evacuation net.::

A series of acknowledgments went up and Optimus turned to give space between himself and his troops, who would soon follow, leading the Decepticons after him. Transforming, Optimus sped across the tarmac toward the south border. He could see the towering corporate area of El Segundo and made that his target.

They had more troops toward the south, using the corporate buildings that made up much of El Segundo as cover; several squads had established hiding places high and low to surprise their enemies. As he raced south to lure Galvatron into his trap, Optimus mused that it didn't matter what their enemy's name was; the Autobots used decoys and ambushes just as often as the Decepticons did. Today they were lucky to be fighting in a location full of places and angles that helped hide the true number of their forces. He was pleased that the American government had acted quickly to provide such a... suitable venue. Mission City had been a disaster because they hadn't evacuated the civilians; here, they had the small city to use against their enemies without fear of civilian casualties.

::Low flying 'Cons less than a klick out—,:: Jolt suddenly yelled. ::Oh, slag, yeah, he's here!::

Optimus was almost to the edge of the tarmac, where the barbed wire fence had already been taken down, and he catapulted forward, transforming while in motion. Barely on his feet, he turned to face the incoming Decepticon signals that burned on his radar. Three jets—the largest flanked by the two smaller—shot over the air straight toward him, leaving a line of burning tarmac as they opened fire onto the ground below. The fusion blasts coming from the center mech revealed his identity even before the flanking jets separated, perhaps at some unheard order. But as the other two jets split off, it started the transformation sequence, and a large purple mech descended from the sky.

The huge Decepticon landed hard, his weapons already out; a mace swinging dangerously from his arm. A white face marred by a triumphant grin and blood red optics made Optimus' spark flare in anger, not fear. Instantly, all other aspects of the battle ceased to matter to his processors.

"Galvatron!" he shouted, blade hissing in the open December air. Beyond them to the north, there were more explosions, but Optimus could not afford to let his focus be on anything else besides this single confrontation.

"Brother!" Galvatron roared back, almost with cheer. He grinned openly at the Autobot leader, as if he was pleased by his miraculous reappearance instead of confused or angry.

"You are not my brother," Optimus replied gravely. He couldn't help but stare at Galvatron's chassis, as if he could see the mutated spark that lay within. "You are a monster."

He could no longer feel any flicker of recognition between his own spark and Galvatron's, even when only yards apart. Before, Megatron's spark had always had a sense of familiarity to it, even if it was a negative one. Now, Optimus could only feel the sense of death, a sense of something aberrant.
Galvatron sneered at the cold greeting. "Always trying to be the hallowed one, Optimus. I'm no more a monster than you, it seems," he said, daring to edge closer. His optics raked over the Autobot's form. "So glad to see you back on your feet."

Optimus' optics narrowed. "My resurrection came from the purity of the All Spark. Yours… did not." He held his sword higher, wordlessly daring the Decepticon to come closer. "Cease this fight before it kills you again, Galvatron. You will not receive mercy if you do not surrender now!"

That sent the grin from Galvatron's faceplates. He snarled. "That's not an issue, Optimus—because it is I who will kill you!" he screamed. He threw his hand into the air. "DECEPTICONS! ATTACK!"

0000

Northern Brazil
12:40 PM

The trip south had been calm. Vortex was glad for it. He'd had enough anxiety in the last two weeks to last him a lifetime; the peaceful trip had soothed some of that, even if they were headed toward yet another battle to fight. The flight itself was pleasant; Rachel alone flew with him, and he was able to enjoy the simple task of flying itself. He hadn't flown more than short distances in decades—the fact that he was able to spend uninterrupted time with Rachel was a bonus.

The human sitting quietly in his pilot's seat did nothing except gaze out the window, making the occasional comment at what she saw, and nap. They were flying in a convoy of other military helicopters, but there was no need to keep up conversation with the human pilots. Bluestreak was being brought in by a jet, leaving Plumas far later than Vortex and Rachel. Vortex had stubbornly closed communications with the Autobot a few hours before, mostly because Bluestreak panicked even more when he was allowed to ramble about how much he missed Kass already. They were all worried about their medic friend being by herself, but Vortex didn't see a point in working himself up into a state of hysteria talking about it.

That left him and Rachel together. Normal couples might have spent their last few hours talking or expressing affection, Vortex had mused. But not them.

"We're probably gonna die down here," Rachel said suddenly. It had been nearly forty-five minutes since the last time she had spoken.

Vortex wished he could shrug. "Maybe," he agreed. Not that either of them would go down without a fight, but they both understood the dangers of the mission perfectly. It was a miracle either human or mech was there, actually, considering their self-preservation instincts.

They were going to an area that was known to hold many drones, they would also be the team closest to the Nemesis' orbit location. It was not a safe place. For many of their NEST companions, and perhaps even the three of them, it would become their grave. None of them had pleasant thoughts about this trip.

"…Hey, 'Tex?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah?"

The human looked up at his dash and her guarded expression never wavered. "I love you."

The cabin fell quiet as Vortex barely managed to keep his propellers in motion from her unexpected declaration. At first, he was flooded with a variety of simpleminded emotions like happiness and the overwhelming desire to reciprocate the statement. The helicopter gathered his senses, however.
Neither of them really knew what love was supposed to be. But even if they were wrong about it, it didn't matter. Because they had something, and it was enough.

"...I'm glad," he said at length. Rachel said nothing more and stared out the window, gathering her nerves through silence. Vortex let her have it, and pushed his own emotions out of his processors. They had a fight to prepare for.

They reached the Boa Vista International Airport soon after 12:30 in the afternoon, where the hot sun beat down on them, even when it was winter back in the states. Rachel complained of the heat while wearing her suit, but there was no way she could take it off now. They only had to wait a few minutes before the jet carrying Bluestreak, equipment and ammunition arrived, and then they followed the NEST commander's orders to head several miles southeast of the city toward a town called Cantá, which was near a large drone hive. They'd take out the hive and then move on to the next closest, clearing drones until there was word of a Decepticon assault in their region. Vortex knew that NEST understood the inherent risk of ignoring the drones in favor of the Decepticons, but their closeness to Nemesis' expected orbit was too important to disregard either.

Bluestreak hadn't shut up since he'd had landed at the airport and Vortex couldn't turn his comm. off while they waited around the strip for the NEST soldiers to get in contact with the Brazilian air force. Once they had clearance, they'd move through the blocked off RR-444 toward Cantá. Oddly, the helicopter felt less irritated than usual while listening to the gunner ramble nervously about the task ahead of them.

::—and they said I might not be able to use the buildings as cover, because they are short and sparse::: Bluestreak said. His anxiety was obviously stemming from their isolation from the rest of the team. Rachel was lucky Bluestreak was using their internal comm's and she didn't have to listen to this. ::I don't understand why they'd suggest I go here when the area isn't even right for my skills:::

::We have more places to go to than just this village::: Vortex replied, disinterested. The rooky could shoot fine on a normal field even without a sniping point. It was irrelevant with the drones anyway. The younger mech was just looking for something to gripe about.

::Yeah, but I'm just saying, we should have thought this out better::: Bluestreak replied, still worked up, his doorwings fluttering on his back. Vortex snorted.

His gaze drifting, Vortex listened idly to Bluestreak's ranting and kept a loose optic on Rachel, who was standing near them, looking out of place. They didn't quite mesh with the NEST soldiers, even though they knew several of them. At least once the fighting started, it wouldn't matter who was socially awkward.

That's when he found Nemesis. Vortex stopped Rachel as they started to move to another section of the airfield at NEST's command, Bluestreak not too far behind.

"You probably can't see it that well with human eyes, but look," Vortex asked. He pointed for her to follow up to the correct section of space above them. "Directly above us, eleven o'clock."

Craning their necks, the three of them collectively gazed upwards. Vortex had to train his sensors carefully in order to see the sleek dark dot in the sky, which was definitely no plane or natural object. Right now, it wasn't near the moon, but it most likely was between the satellite and the Earth. The ship would stay in free fall there and send troops down when needed. Rachel had raised a hand to her face, using it to block excess light as she took in the sky.

"Well, look at that ugly motherfucker," she murmured. She was peering upwards through her visor, so perhaps she could see it better than normal human eyes would. "How close is it?"
Bluestreak moved closer. "Last update from NASA said it was between the moon and Earth. It's probably going to get a bit lower, but it won't land. It's too big to maneuver around fighter jets," he explained. He sounded nervous, which explained why his doorwings were flickering up and down. "Oooh, I wish the Hyperion would hurry. They'll be there in about forty minutes. Maybe. If they can get past Nemesis' defenses."

Pleasant thoughts. "I wonder if the others can see this," Rachel said, curious.

Vortex shrugged. "Probably only those in North America can. It'd be pretty low in the sky," he said. "Those in Europe and Asia won't see it until night."

Rachel snorted. "Great. So we get front row seats to the light show. Just perf—"

Rapid gunfire and the sound of men shouting made them all jump. Sensors lighting up, Vortex homed in on the disturbance. Several dozen of their soldiers and the Brazilian forces were pointing and opening fire on what looked like flock of birds far out over the city near where the forests began. Vortex knew that was an illusion immediately and activated his weapons protocols. Several of the human officers scrambled for order and chastised their frightened underlings for wasting bullets when the swarm was still out of range.

"Drones! Swarm to the south!" the officer yelled. "Get to cover first, and fire only when they're in range!"

For a brief moment, he felt like he was back in time, where forest replaced buildings and damp earth replaced hot concrete. Vortex fought a fear that rose up inside his spark when his sensors rapidly told him their usual allies weren't there. He forced the alarm out of his processors; this was no time to panic. They had more Autobots scheduled to head their way from the Hyperion when it entered orbit, so the three on the ground had to hold their position until then.

Rachel launched into the air without a moment's hesitation, bringing up from her side the concussion blaster WJ had recalibrated to deliver an even more lethal punch. She had already agreed with Vortex's suggestion to give him cover fire while he fought the things head on, but no plan was foolproof. They would eventually be separated, defending the other humans or simply because of a too-close enemy. Prepared for the worst, they took their positions, holding fire until the swarm got closer.

The majority of the humans lining up alongside the NEST soldiers were Brazilian soldiers, although there were a few groups with arm patches indicating they were from Venzuela. With such a limited amount of time to prepare them, many of the non-NEST officials didn't yet have sabot enabled weapons, but Vortex had to admit, when one of them unveiled a jeep with a machine gun turret, maybe they could win this through a sheer volume of bullets.

While their team scrambled, Bluestreak rushed up to Vortex's side. "I need to get higher!" the Praxian shouted over the noise of the machine gun that unleashed fury on the incoming swarm. Back in Europe, they hadn't had many places for the gunner to go, so it was wise they made use of his skills while they had the structures nearby. "I'll get to the roof of the terminal, so—"

The machine gun had broken the drones' formation, scattering them. Vortex snarled when he realized this wasn't such a good thing, as the pinball effect had the drones dropping down on them from all different angles. He broke away from Bluestreak and opened fire on the drones that tried to get close to them. Being the only Cybertronians on site, perhaps they'd be the biggest targets. The drones did enjoy slicing through organic lifeforms, however, so the humans had to watch out carefully. A whole line of men was diced to pieces when three drones dive bombed their position. Screams lit up the air.
A few drones slipped past Vortex's position, streamlining for the only other Cybertronian on the field. Bluestreak managed to bring one drone down with rapid fire, but his strength was not in close combat skills. The moment his attention went to one of the others lashing out at his face, the second began to pummel his side. The gunner screamed.

"Bluestreak!" Vortex shouted, raising his guns up instinctually to drive the drone off of the other mech once he was able to break away from the last two drones firing on himself.

He hammered the drone attempting to launch at Bluestreak's helm, breaking several of its limbs off and sending it to the ground, before firing on the one trying to claw into the Praxian's side. Shooting a drone off someone was dangerous no matter what the circumstances, since he could have shot his teammate as well as the drone. Bluestreak might have taken a few hits from his gun, but didn't complain. The drone shrieked when a hail of bullets nailed it in the back. It gave Bluestreak enough leeway to hurl the creature off of him. The gesture sent him stumbling to the ground and Vortex closed the distance between them, finishing the drone off with his own razor sharp blades.

With Rachel covering them from the air, Vortex turned back to the downed mech beside him. Despite some energon leakage on his left side, Bluestreak seemed alright.

"You okay, rookie?" Vortex asked quickly, watching as Rachel took on another drone trying to get past her toward them. She needed someone to watch her back while in the air.

Bluestreak accepted his hand and scrambled to his feet. "Th-thanks, Vortex," he said, shaky. "Boy, is this like old times, or what?"

"Hn." Vortex gave the mech a shove toward the building. "Get to the roof, I'll cover you."

Nodding, the soldier in Bluestreak returned. "Right," he said, dodging to the side as quickly as he could.

There were no stairs leading up to the roof of the airport terminal that would have held the mech, but Bluestreak was resourceful. He used the lineup of heavy machinery that the airport staff had hurriedly moved aside for the military and climbed up to the roof with grace that belied his true mass. Vortex saw him haul himself up over the small ledge and turned back to his own fight.

Vortex knew they could win this, even if the humans were flailing around still, mostly from the shock of facing aliens for the first time. They were rapidly getting themselves under control though, so Vortex and his allies only had to pick up the slack briefly.

Rachel fought valiantly with her new abilities. She continued to use the tactic she had employed since the day Wheeljack had made the prototype suit all those years ago, playing bait to draw the drones closer to Vortex or a hail of bullets. With the new suit, however, she now could stand her ground and bring drones down while on the same field as the fliers. She still had to keep her distance, but Vortex grinned behind his mask when he saw how her bloodlust hadn't dampened in the least since the last time they engaged the drones back in their old world—

Like a supersized cannon ball, a drone hit him straight in the back with enough force to send him crashing to the ground. He recovered from the pile-driving hit instantly, rolling to his feet and grabbing ahold of the thrashing creature to tear it apart with his bare hands. Vortex ignored the pain of the serrated limbs biting into his arms and pummeled the optic until it went dark. There was no reprieve, because there was already a second one lunging toward his helm. Vortex tried to duck, but it would only take a matter of seconds before the creature collided with him.

He was relieved when three precise, lethal shots from a magnesium powered rifle sliced through one
side of the drone's limbs and then tore straight into its armor just below the optic. It was thrown to the side from the impacts, and hit the ground skidding, frame limp.

The shots came from up high. Vortex didn't need to look toward to terminal to find the shooter.

::Thanks,:: he grunted, scanning the air carefully before standing up, just in case.

Bluestreak lost his annoying upbeat attitude during a battle, but that didn't stop him from saying, ::My pleasure.::

The battle was nothing new, nothing surprising, at least for the three of them. Vortex took down two more on his own and Rachel managed to kill a few solo as well. After twenty minutes, the last drone shrieked its last screech and the field was filled with heavy tropical air and the sound of men scrambling for order. The wounded moaned, but Vortex was pleased by the lack of telltale drone noises. The skies were clear and dead frames littered the field, outnumbering the organic remains just barely.

This was a success, he thought with grim satisfaction. It had been an unexpected location for the fight, but they had been prepared.

"Everyone round up and reload!" one of the human officers from NEST shouted. "Wounded to the hospital, while the rest of you get ready to move! We need to get out of the city! Todo el mundo se preparan paramoverse! Prepare-se paraír!"

Rachel hovered over to his side, thankfully uninjured. Her armor was no more resistant to the drones' serrated limbs than mech armor was, but she could handle bullets a whole lot better than without the suit.

"Where's Blue?" she asked, out of breath, as she landed. Even though the suit did the flying part for her, adrenaline wiped human energy out just as quickly as running did.

"Coming down from the building," Vortex said, glancing toward the rooftop to make sure of that. He kicked one of the dead drones away irritably. "Augh. These fraggers are just as plentiful as in Europe. Primus."

"At least they die the same," Rachel replied, sounding just as annoyed. She looked up at him. "You okay?"

A few scratches, but nothing major. "Yeah. You?"

"Just peachy," the human said. She suddenly made an odd squirming motion with her entire upper body. "Don't tell anyone, but this suit is itchy as fuck. I think I'm going to get a rash."

Vortex made a disgusted face behind his mask. "Ugh, shut up," he said, not needing that kind of imagery.

Rachel laughed at his discomfort. "Hey, you're the one getting involved with an organic. Get used to our disgustingness—"

"Vortex!" Bluestreak yelled.

Turning, both Rachel and Vortex strained to find the other mech. Vortex spotted Bluestreak attempting to climb down from the roof. "What?"

"Incoming 'Con fliers to the south!" Bluestreak all but screamed. He pointed up toward that location,
gesturing wildly as those on the ground whirled around in shock. "Get the humans out of the way!"

Neck struts straining, Vortex immediately looked upwards, his optics scouring the open blue sky for their enemies. His gaze was drawn toward the center of the sky, just below where Nemesis sat, and with alarming clarity, three Seekers were dropping toward them like living missiles. Vortex growled loudly amid the yells of the humans calling for their men to take cover. Their enemies had taken advantage of the drones as a distraction. They would be on them in a matter of seconds. Fragging Seekers—

Their intended trajectory would take them straight over the airfield—right over their heads. Vortex had gone to grab Rachel and make sure they weren't in the line of fire, but Rachel was already rushing away from him. Not to safety, but rather, toward the terminal with her arms waving.

"Shit—BLUE, GET DOWN FROM THE ROOF!" Rachel screamed. She made a strangled sound when she looked back up at the sky. "Oh, HELL! BLUESTREAK!"

It was too late. A line of plasma obliterated the ground barely ten meters away, sending debris and fire up around them. Humans screamed and Vortex ducked lowly to avoid a faceplate full of concrete and to give Rachel cover below. Spark racing, he immediately righted himself after the jets flew past them, their attack rapid across the tarmac. In one fell swoop, they blasted straight into the terminal's south side—straight through Bluestreak's position.

Sulfur and explosive nitrates filled the air—not enough to clog his filters, but it sent the humans without protective suits into coughing fits. Rachel had been knocked over by the explosions still, and was struggling to get up to go toward the fallen building, her fear for their friend apparent in her ragged breathing.

"Find some cover for us, I'll get him!" Vortex snapped at her, able to gather the energy to move much quicker. He couldn't hear Bluestreak and he wasn't answering his comm., but Vortex wasn't going to panic yet. Yet.

Rachel swore. "Vortex!"

He dove towards the fire, ignoring her yells. Vortex ignored the heat and struggled over the debris. He finally managed to pick up a Cybertronian energy signature and moved as quickly as he could. The lineup of cranes and lifts had collapsed, but chances were the explosion had simply knocked Bluestreak over. The fall from the roof wouldn't have killed him. Vortex's theories were mostly confirmed when he finally spotted the gray body under a good section of the bombed building.

::Elgart to NBE Vortex!: an unfamiliar human voice broke into his radio frequency without warning. A NEST soldier, undoubtedly. He didn't care.

::What? !:: he demanded, finally reaching the downed Praxian. He was relieved to see Bluestreak was already trying (albeit with great difficulty) to get up.

::Kandahar is under attack.:: the NEST officer said, causing the helicopter to freeze. ::They're saying it's one mech. One huge, five-story mech! They said it was six other mechs at first, but now —!::

Vortex didn't need to know the details. He looked to the east, his spark heavy with dread.

Gestalt.

0000
Kandahar, Afghanistan  
8:45 PM

Everyone had quirks. Kass guessed that she and her friends had more than the average person, perhaps, due to their unfortunate origins. There was the double-glancing over the shoulder at loud noises, the flinching at close contact, and the paranoid twitches that set in when things got too quiet. Kass had a few more though, like the habit of thinking of and talking to her dead family when the going was rough and she had to stay focused. It was sort of what Vortex did, Rachel confided to her, only Kass had never tried to be her family. She just... talked to them.

Mostly it happened when she was working on an injured friend, like she was now. They had been doing so well, but Kass wasn't surprised when Smokescreen wound up retreating back to the med-bay for a quick patch job to his legs. They had been fighting almost exclusively at the edge of the base, toward the south road, with neither side really moving in either direction. The goal was to move the Decepticons further out in order to give their allied fliers the chance to shoot at the 'Cons without risking the base, but Kass was soon ducking at invisible gunfire as the air force had no choice but to open fire so close by, within less than half a mile.

"I need another piece of sheet metal," Kass said, glancing over to one of the mechanics helping her. She was almost done rewiring several wires under the first derma-layer of armor. The thought crossed her mind that her father would be amused to see her giving orders. "And we're going to need another battery pack for the soldering gun soon, please."

"Can barely feel anything," Smokescreen said, pleasantly even as the night was lit up by fiery bursts.

They had lost power to a good section of the west side of the airfield thanks to a Seeker's missile. Kass had given up on working inside, so she was operating in the doorway just to use the explosions from the fight for extra lighting. *I know, I know, dangerous, dad. What else can I do?*

"That's good," she said. Seeing him wince, she thought about off-lining his sensor relays to the injured area, to dull the pain—something she knew her mother would have done, but then remembered that Ratchet had advised that it could cause the wires to short-circuit when the relays were reactivated.

The Praxian chuckled at some unheard joke. "Sideswipe says you're better than Ratchet is, despite training under him," he said.

Kass spared him a smile. "I only wish I was as good as he is at this."

"You're just fine," Smokescreen assured her. *You'd really like this guy, Kevin. He'll make a great big brother figure for Bluestreak.* "You remind me of Ratchet's first assistant, this mech called First Aid. You'll get along just fine, the two of you—"

There was a harsh screeching sound—Cybertrontian, Kass' ears belatedly confirmed—before a series of ground-rattling explosions shook the entire tarmac. Kass nearly fell over Smokescreen's legs before scrambling to her feet, trying to figure out what had caused the noise. At first, she could only see the Autobots, but then she noticed they were retreating from the edge of the compound. She could see streaks of smoke in the air, plus new pockets of fire in between the mechs.

Had more mechs arrived, in their protoforms again? Obviously Decepticons, considering how Hot Rod and Sideswipe began to return a whole new wave of gunfire and plasma bolts. Kass didn't like how many there were now.

"What was that?" Wilkinson asked, alarmed at the new chaos.
"More mechs?" Kass' eyes drifted farther to the right as she took in not one, but five mechs easily beating Sideswipe and his team back. "I…oh…" It was dark without the other half of the base lights on, but the mechs had their headlights on and Kass could make out the outlines of the immense number of mechs battling across the field.

Mechs coming down in their protoforms meant they were grounders, which shouldn't be as bad as having to face Seekers. But Kass didn't like how frantic the Autobots were. Something was wrong.

Smokescreen hissed and tried to sit up. "Oh, slag, it's the Constructicons!"

"The who—?" Wilkinson asked, startled.

Kass knew that name, only because stories from Wildrider and Vortex had made it familiar. "Gestalt team!" she exclaimed shrilly. She dropped one of her wrenches to the ground in a clatter. "They're combiners, they're six mechs in one form!"

They had to get out of there. Now. Kass turned and tried to find an officer, or even Mirage. They had to get the civilians and the humans out of there. There was no way the humans stood a chance fighting the combined Gestalt—Devastator. She wasn't even sure the mechs could handle it!

"They combine? !" one of the other mechanics exclaimed, horrified. At least they understood the concept, then.

"Yes, but right now, get everyone out!" Kass shot back. She cringed when she saw Sideswipe being hurled aside by one of the larger Constructicons. "Before they—!"

It was too late. Kass gasped in sync with several other of her mechanic helpers when the Constructicons were finally able to get clear of the Autobots and transform.

It was nothing like watching a mech transform from alt-mode to root-mode, and yet, it was very similar. Kass was only able to gaze upwards—and upwards—in total awe as the six Decepticons seemed to throw themselves into a single pile that grew taller and taller in a matter of seconds. Taking the time to observe was suicidal, but Kass was unable to look away. It was a beautiful transformation, to watch legs and arms sprout from what had appeared to be an interlinking pile of metal, and also terrifying. The resulting form was clearly over fifty feet tall, but Kass wouldn't even know how to begin rationalizing its sudden bulk from just six mere mechs.

Oh. Oh no.

In that brief instance of silence, the Autobots roused their human allies from their speechlessness by leaping to action.

"Get off the tarmac!" Smokescreen shouted. He stumbled to his pedes, still injured but ignoring it. "We'll distract them!"

They knew the dangers of a Gestalt better than anyone else. Kass forced her frail sense of awe out of her mind in order to understand that danger herself. They had to get out of the way. They had incoming air support from the Pakistanis, but unless they cleared the path, Kass knew those left on the airfield would be caught up in the fray.

"Get to a Humvee and make sure we have at least some supplies with us, especially the soldering iron," she called out, grabbing a bucket of scrap metal she used for patching. She winced when Tracks shot by them, headed toward Devastator, who sounded thoroughly enraged by the Autobots already. "Can someone go—?"
Her request died in her throat when another explosion made everyone duck down, fearful of shrapnel. Kass dared a glance out at the field. The fighting was still far enough away that they could escape the worst. The Autobots were fighting desperately, however, under the shadow of the Decepticon behemoth. Kass gasped sharply when she realized that her allies weren't just trying to shoot the monster to stop him. They were trying to rescue one of their own from his grasp.

The monster was literally lifting and slamming Smokescreen up and down, straight into the cement. Even from the distance she was at, Kass could hear the breaking of plating and armor. The other Autobots were either too far away fighting other Decepticon grounders, or were trying desperately to get up after being swatted aside themselves. She could see that if they could only get close enough, they could Smokescreen out, but not if Devastator was focused on them.

Suddenly, Kass knew what she could do.

"Hall, what are you—HALL!" Wilkinson yelled in alarm when Kass abruptly ran straight toward Devastator. It would only take a short minute to get there, not that Kass' panic-driven mind was counting.

Kass wasn't a soldier, and she wasn't particularly brave. But after years of skirting around the fact that she had a skill that could help people, Kass was very certain she was a medic. And medics did whatever they could to save lives.

Inwardly, she prayed for strength from her family—and for Ratchet's inspiration.

"Oi, slaghead!" she yelled, waving her arms ridiculously over her head, as if they couldn't already see the organic lunatic rushing toward them at full speed. "Boltbrain, glitchhead, afthead—!"

To her relief and terror, the giant head of Devastator lifted slowly and turned her way. Kass almost collapsed under the glare of two huge, red optics; only one of them was nearly the size of her entire body. To have that monster's attention solely on her, for even the briefest of moments, was more heart-stopping than even the largest of drone swarms would have been.

That gaze didn't linger on her for long, thankfully. With the focus of his attacker distracted briefly, Smokescreen was able to shove his gun into the finger joints on the hand that was holding him down. The gun went off and Devastator roared in pain—and moved his hand away just enough for the Praxian to roll away from the combiner.

Kass didn't wait around a moment longer. She turned about-face and took off running back to the med-bay and the rest of her team. Behind her, she heard more gunfire, and it was all she could do just to pray and keep running.

*I know that was stupid, mum, dad, but I had to do it, I had to do it—*

"KASS!" Sideswipe yelled. He dove behind her, giving her cover fire. Kass didn't stop. "Get the hell out of here!"

She was certainly not going to deny that order. Kass didn't know if Smokescreen was following, or if he could get away, but she had done her part. Now, the only trick was to survive.

Her lower legs felt numb and Kass tripped slightly when she was only a hundred or so yards from the med-bay. She could see her team taking cover behind the hangar, ready to jump into a Humvee that was still standing upright. Getting into a moving vehicle made them a bigger target, but it might be their only chance to escape Devastator. Kass had almost gotten back up when she heard a mech stomp closer.
"EVERYONE DOWN!" Hot Rod roared, prompting Kass to dive behind another burnt out vehicle and cover her head obligingly. "DEFENSOR INCOMING!"

And then—

The sky exploded into violence and fire. Kass ducked further down when she heard what had to be a tornado blooming overhead. The wind shrieked, the explosions outmatched any thunderstorm nature could have produced on its own, and the ground shook as violently as if they were on the surface of water. For a long moment, Kass thought the world was actually self-destructing.

But a daring glimpse out at the field proved that thought wrong. The world might end later, but as of that moment, it was the battlefield between the two largest mechs Kass had ever seen in her life.

The second behemoth was unrecognizable, but considering the fact that the red and blue titan was grappling viciously with Devastator, Kass had to assume it was on Earth's side. All other activities, though they still continued, became less important. Kass was frozen in place by terror and awe once more as she watched the two combiners tear each other to pieces. In fact, she almost expected to see mechs come flying out in chunks amid the violence.

If this was the worst both Autobot and Decepticon forces could unleash upon each other, and humanity, Kass was vaguely certain her planet was utterly doomed.

Gargantuan guns fired at close range, sending volcanic clouds of smoke and sparks into the air. They were nearly a half-mile from her location, but Kass suddenly knew she had to get off the field. The Autobot gestalt team most likely would not have the luxury of watching its step.

Coughing through the smoke, Kass stumbled back toward the east side of the air field, where she could see Hot Rod dragging Smokescreen back to the med-bay. Kass waved Wilkinson's concern away, but accepted a bottle of water. She was barely able to keep upright when the Autobots who didn't turn into a giant single robot regrouped.

"Get them to draw Devastator away from the base!" Mirage ordered over the sound of the two-mech battle, which was thankfully moving further and further away. "The Pakistani air force will be there to give additional firepower in the next six breems! Prepare for additional Decepticon grounders on base, approaching from the west!"

Sideswipe saluted and rushed off with Tracks, probably to help Defensor with the effort. "Got it!"

Pulling the portable scanner Ratchet had made for her out of her pocket, Kass took a moment to collect her breath. While her team rushed off to grab more supplies, she glanced over Smokescreen's exacerbated injuries briefly; he was bleeding more profusely from his leg and one wing was really dented, but he didn't appear to have severe internal damage. When the scanner confirmed her guess, giving her a list of damage, rated by severity, her eyes drifted back toward the two gestalt teams and she found she was still at a loss for words. For the life of her, Kass couldn't figure out who their unexpected ally—allies?—were.

"Who are they?" she asked, hoarsely. They had to be Autobots, if they were fighting for their side. But… a gestalt? She knew the Autobots had them, but she hadn't heard about any coming from the Hyperion.

"The Protectobots, combined as Defensor. Hot Shot's leading the charge," Hot Rod said jovially. He grinned at the shell-shocked human. "Gestalts. Gotta love 'em, gotta hate their fragging guts."

He patted Smokescreen briefly on the shoulder before transforming to rush after Mirage to meet the
incoming Decepticon grounders. The air was still overwhelmed by explosions and the roaring of two giant aliens locked into a physical confrontation, but at least the ground wasn't shaking as badly.

Taking her tools from an assistant wearily, Kass knew she had to focus. They weren't done yet, and she wasn't either especially. She told Smokescreen to lie back again and she hoped to finish the patch job without interruption again.

"You okay, Kass?" Smokescreen asked. Kass nodded and the Praxian grinned, the gesture illuminated by the fiery debris that littered the compound instead of any human-made lighting now. "Thanks for the distraction, by the way."

It would be a story to share with her family later on, that was for sure. "Don't mention it," she replied, weary. She did smile when she motioned at his leg. "Come on, let's get you patched up."

Stay with me, guys. Stay with me.

0000

Germany
5:40 PM

Barns had just finished running an Autobot-written decryption program on another set of satellite maps sent to them by NORAD when the comm. line sprang to life on the console next to him.

"Autobot Jazz to WAAF command."

Normally, protocol would dictate Barns would leave the call to one of the other soldiers present, even if most had just left for a quick break, but Barns all but dove for the console. "Jazz!" he exclaimed into the mic, barely remembering to flick it on.

"Yo, Barns!" Jazz exclaimed, sounding immediately cheered. The cheer was expertly forced back after a moment, however. "Much as I'm glad to hear your voice, where's Major Young?"

"I'm not sure," Barns admitted. He glanced worriedly at their maps. "Jazz, we just picked up a huge amount of drone activity headed toward the north-west of Wiesbaden."

"Oh, that's just lovely," the Autobot replied, heartily sarcastic. "Me an' TC just got a call from Bumblebee b'fore it got dropped."

Barns frowned. "At Plumas?"

"Yeah. Looks like th' Fallen's on th' move now, since Plumas just got a face full of drones, too."

The breath left Barns' lungs immediately and he gaped in horror at the mic. "Mon Dieu, are they alright?!" he asked. His mind raced with fear now—what about Danny, and Arcee, and Wildrider?!

Jazz, thankfully, remained unfazed. "Yeah, apparently Starscream busted outta jail just in time t' give 'em a hand," he said, sounding a little reluctant to admit where the help had come from. "That disaster aside, they're okay. Prime's got Galvatron doin' their dance over in LA at this point. Communication is down right now fer everyone 'cept us an' NORAD it seems, so keep that line up fer as long as ya can."

"Great," Barns murmured, dropping his head into his hands. Oh, boy, he was going to have a headache from this. That explained why their intelligence sources were drying up like a stream in the desert, and why the soldiers were so agitated.
"Look, we gotta get movin'," Jazz said, sounding apologetic. "If th' drones are gonna swarm up here, we gotta meet them head on."

Something uneasy settled into Barns' gut. "You think the Fallen is doing this? Sending in drones?" he asked, brow narrowed.

"Why not?" Jazz shot back, amused in a way only he would be. He sighed. "Okay, TC's scouting ahead. We'll be in touch."

Barns grabbed the mic hastily, as if that would stop the mech from disappearing. "Wait, wait, who are you fighting with?" he asked.

"Just me, Hoist, an’ TC fer mech support, but we got reinforcements on th' way last thing I heard," Jazz replied. "Tell Major Young about this. We'll call later."

He didn't want the call to end, but Barns knew he had to. "Okay. Good luck," he said, wishing he could see his friends. The call ended and he was left staring at the cold microphone in silence.

For a long second, Barns had the chance to consider his next move. He had to find someone else in charge and tell them what Jazz had told him. He didn't have to look far, luckily, since there were still other soldiers in the room. Barns was surprised to see the remaining three men staring at him intensely, one of them looking mildly impressed.

"You know the aliens on first name basis?" the soldier asked, brown eyebrows high up on his brow. He must have been about thirty, despite his higher ranking. "Wow."

Barns hesitated. "Euh? Oh, yes…" He straightened and knew they didn't have time to dally. "We need to find Major Young, right away."

The soldier grinned, thankfully understanding. Barns didn't know what his rank was, but he was definitely an officer. "Gotcha. Achen, übernehmen die Kontrolle!" he called out to one of the other soldiers. He clasped Barns' shoulder and urged him toward the exit. "Come on, kid."

He led the way through the crowded hallways, apparently knowing where they had to go. Barns' thoughts kept drifting elsewhere, namely to his friends and what they were up against. Jazz and Thundercracker were facing immense danger, those at Plumas had just escaped some of their own… Lord knew how Kass was doing, or what was happening with Vortex's team. Barns prayed for the safety of his friends, because at this point, it was all he could do.

"Hey, Mick," the soldier in front of him called out just as they left the main building and headed toward another multi-story building a few yards away. The sky was so dark outside, with rain threatening from the east. The soldier guiding him waved at another man headed their way. "Where's Major Young? At the officer's station—?"

Before his friend had the chance to speak, he was ripped apart by a stream of bullets that seemed to arrive out of thin air. Barns gasped loudly before his gaze turned upwards, and his shock morphed into terror.

Descending from the sky, a pack of approximately ten drones had used the cover of night and the rainy clouds to surprise their forces. They unleashed a wave of gunfire toward another line of soldiers as their forms whipped through the air violently. Their red eyes were like meteors threatening to burn down the whole base.

"Whoa!" the soldier in front of Barns yelled. He fell back into him. "What the hell is—? !"
"Drones!" Barns cried. He grabbed wildly at the soldier's jacket. "Get back inside, get back inside!"

He tugged the older man back toward the building they had just exited, knowing neither of them could fight even one drone without weapons. The soldier had gone for his sidearm, but at the sight of the drones descending upon the field, he seemed to know that was useless. Barns saw a group of soldiers with larger weapons launch a counterstrike from across the field, distracting the drones, and he prayed that would be enough.

A stream of bullets made both men duck and hit the ground hard just feet from the door. Barns rolled over instantly, heart racing. He could hear the drone before he saw it; when his eyes looked upwards, he saw a flash of silver, and froze when he realized a single drone had found them defenseless.

For the briefest of moments, Barns was staring down that one bright optic and he could see in its reflection his whole life. His grandparents, Goddard, his friends, Wheeljack, the cold threat of death always nipping at his feet—for just that moment, he was five months back in time, when fate was consistently dragging his life down toward the grave.

The blast of a sabot-powered weapon broke that moment like a sledgehammer to glass. Barns ducked instinctually as the drone screamed under the assault, being flung away from the two downed men. Staying still was suicide, even if they were receiving backup from other soldiers. Barns grabbed hold of the soldier beside him and hauled him straight into the doorway, out of the line of fire. They stumbled again and Barns scrambled into one of the side offices, dragging the other man with him. The explosions continued, but eventually drifted away from their position. Barns gasped for air and waited to hear either their enemies or allies approaching.

"We can't just hide here," the soldier suddenly said. He climbed to his feet shakily, looking like he was ready to fall over at any moment. "You stay here."

"No way," Barns replied, not wanting to be alone, or leave the other man to investigate without backup. He crept after the soldier carefully, wishing he had some kind of weapon. The soldier's pistol wouldn't do much to help them.

They made it outside again, only daring to expose themselves to the open when they saw soldiers rushing nearby and no gunfire followed. Barns saw clear skies, except to the north-west. He could see the remaining swarm of drones departing, which struck him as odd, since there were plenty of other soldiers in the open. No one could simply scare the drones away…

Slowly, the tremor in his limbs grew worse, but the fear died away. Barns slid back against the wall of the building and mentally gave thanks they survived. His companion mirrored him and slid down the other side of the doorway weakly.

"Mother o' God, they were like demon squid," the soldier complained, gripping his chest.

Barns exhaled and took a moment to rest against the metal frame. "Yeah."

"Thanks, kid," the American continued. He grinned over at the younger man. "You really saved my tail."

"Ha… don't mention it," Barns replied. He was exhausted, but somehow found the energy to raise his hand in greeting, feeling it was necessary at that point. "I'm Barnaby Rancourt."

The soldier grinned and held out his hand. "Nice to meet you. Name's Joe—"

Their exchange was interrupted when a tall, older man came stumbling out of the doorway, almost falling over the two on the floor. Barns immediately tried to stand, recognizing him as Major Young,
the man he had to speak with.

"Rancourt!" the major barked. He rounded on the young man before Barns was even really on his feet. "Intelligence just said that you got a message from the NBEs at the front." He gazed around the airfield with a contentious expression. "God damn it, look at this mess—"

Barns nodded. "Yes, sir. They're headed to take on the swarm head on, but apparently, the swarm has gotten past them."

Young scowled. "No, we just got more satellite images in. This cloud was from the south," he said. He ran a hand through his thin head of hair. "Where the hell are they coming from?"

"They left though, sir, so we have time to chase them down," Joe pointed out, frowning.

As if on cue, all three of them gazed out toward the horizon, where the drones had gone rushing. "…Right." Young watched the drones with an expression Barns was familiar with; he was trying to figure out their enemies. "Look at them go. No way we scared them off that quick. Word in from Wiesbaden is that these things keep going at you 'til you're dead."

Barns swallowed back a wave of emotion. "That's correct, sir," he said quietly.

Joe hesitated, his eyes still on the departing drone cloud. "…Looks like they're running toward something," he observed.

"But…" Young peered even more closely at the drones, who were far enough way they would need binoculars to get a good look at now. "What?"

That question answered itself, Barns mused later. The three men nearly jumped when a dark haired woman came rushing out of the hallways and ran up to Young's side.

"Sir!" she said, breathless from running. "Our satellites just picked up another Decepticon landing in Wiesbaden!"

Young's eyes narrowed. "Just one?" he asked.

Oh, no, Barns thought, heart pounding. He didn't want to think it, but his mind was already falling down a dark pit of despair.

"The drones seem to be swarming toward him, ignoring our forward teams," the female soldier replied. She finally stopped speaking quickly in order to hesitate over something else as she handed her report over. "Sir, they…"

The pause was enough to give the older men a chance to prepare for the absurdity of the situation. For Barns, those two seconds gave him enough time to turn away from them with a heavy heart. The north grew dark.

"They say he's on fire," she said, exchanging a bewildered look with her commander.

Barns shuddered in a realization they didn't have.

"The Fallen," he whispered, causing his companions to look at him in surprise.

A siren began to wail overhead, but already, it was far too late.
Oh hey, it's that guy! Cool.

A/Ns:
- Yes, Skyfire is traditionally a pacifist. Traditionally, Skyfire didn't survive an apocalypse and a half, or was an active participant in the Decepticon army, however. So, yes, he's sort of badass (and a little broken) in this rendition. Sorry.
- The reason the South American team can't see Nemesis or Hyperion properly is because they are still in broad daylight and objects are harder to see in the atmosphere (ironically). The reason the team in Los Angeles can see it better is because there is enough atmosphere between them on the horizon to make it seem darker. Once it gets a little darker (dusk), it'll become even more visible.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Violence, deaths, justice, and battle ships going head to head in the atmosphere—you know, the usual.

:) I had fun writing this and the next chapter. I hope you enjoy! Thank you so much for editing this, Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters

Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brazil
2:50 PM

Three Seekers roared overhead and more were on the way. Vortex didn't care about either of those things, not at the moment. He was too busy kicking a support beam and shoving concrete off of Bluestreak's back. The fear for what was happening overseas in Afghanistan was redirected when he realized Bluestreak wasn't online anymore.

Vortex was not going to panic. Not. Yet.

Rachel had finally managed to make it across the rubble strewn airfield, and was helping, pulling small chunks off of his legs. Vortex scanned the sky nervously. The remains of the fallen terminal could probably be used as cover for Bluestreak, but the two allies left standing were obvious targets. Luckily, it seemed the Air Force had arrived on the scene and were engaging the Seekers.

The loss of communication between the teams hadn't stopped the Americans from finally interceding. Vortex knew they probably had to thank Keller and his paranoia for that.

"Blue, you okay?" Rachel asked, frantic. She scrambled over debris to get closer to his head when she noticed he was offline. "Bluestreak? !"

"He's alive," Vortex offered, brushing the last bit of debris off the other mech as he crouched down beside them. He had no idea what the extent of Bluestreak's injuries were, but he hoped that it wasn't lethal. They didn't have any medics, real or in training, down here.

Rachel wasn't calming down. "Shit, shit, what do we do? !" she asked. She looked up sharply before Vortex could reply and her voice turned downward in emotion. "Oh, hell no..."

Swiftly, he turned around and instantly saw what she was afraid of. He saw the last of three mechs touch down on the tarmac and open fire on the soldiers who had responded to their arrival. Vortex was alarmed by the size of the mechs—all fliers, but thankfully not Seekers—and realized they were completely outgunned on the ground now.
With the Air Force engaged against the Seekers, he and Rachel would have to deal with these grounders on their own. Vortex felt the loss of Bluestreak as a combatant painfully; Rachel would be in over her head with these heavily armored mechs. Right now, he was the only mech on NEST's side in this engagement.

This… would be interesting.

"Stay down, don't follow!" he said, turning just briefly to find Rachel staring up at him in shock. "Protect him and don't draw attention to yourself!"

The human in his shadow sputtered. "You can't fight them by yourself!" she exclaimed shrilly.

"There're the soldiers…" Vortex looked out at the chaos on the tarmac, with men getting slammed by shrapnel and the sabot rounds only targeting one of the mechs enough to actually damage the grounded Decepticon. "And they're not that big." The middle one had a rather menacing mace.

Rachel proceeded to curse loudly, crouching down further as the Decepticons approached. "Fuck, fuck, fuck—!"

Not exactly the parting words most mechs would listen for from their mates, but Vortex knew that was as good as it was going to get, considering how close their enemies were. Vortex took off toward them, putting distance between himself and the two back in the rubble. He didn't have a plan, not really. That would have been something Onslaught would have worked out, or Swindle. Winging it didn't seem to fit the situation, but Vortex decided to go with what was comfortable for him.

"Decepticons!" he shouted, distracting the two who weren't under direct fire from the humans. He had to speak loudly over the weapons.

It took both a second, but the larger one snarled in recognition. "Traitor!"

Vortex's cannon whined. "No," he said, visor narrowed. "No, I am not."

He might not win this, but he could certainly kill at least one of them, which would make the endeavor worthwhile. He hadn't killed a mech on a real battlefield since Blitzwing had attacked them. He had fought then for his teammates—and he would do no less here and now.

The closest one lunged, brandishing his mace. Vortex roared back in challenge and lunged. He dodged the arc of the swing and grabbed hold of the Decepticon's chestplates. His strong grip locked the Decepticon in place while his arm propellers ripped into the ebony armor, unleashing a wave of sparks and energon that burned Vortex's chest. The mech howled and Vortex shoved his bladed wrists up further, hurling the mech away in the same motion.

Fire lit up his side and Vortex ducked as the other two mechs opened fire on him. Vortex fired back with his own missiles and backed away as quickly as he could to take cover behind the wreckage of a commercial jet.

::Requesting cover fire at coordinates two degrees east, sixty degrees south—:: he sent out to any open friendly comm. lines in the area. The human soldiers were fighting another grounder who was almost down, and there were a few squads who were firing on the backs of Vortex's targets. They needed the Air Force to finish off the fragging Seekers and then help them out—

A grenade landed just feet away from him and Vortex barely turned before it went off. Stumbling, Vortex ignored the wave of pain that went up his back as shrapnel shot into weak sections of his armor and the explosive force of the grenade singed the plating. Turning his injured side away from
the incoming bullets once he was exposed, he focused on returning the gesture with equal force.

In the back of his processors, he thought about death. He knew Kass would tell him it was self destructive, but on the open field of battle like this, Vortex couldn't escape the darker thoughts that made him flinch away from the call of duty, as the humans referred to it. He did not want to join his brothers' sparks, no matter how badly he missed them. He wanted to live, wanted to see another day.

That desire meant he needed to stay mostly focused on the present, however. Vortex kicked a barrel of oil that hadn't been put away or destroyed, and it was quickly turned into a fiery grenade to hurl at the two mechs still upright. All the while, he thought of those other things that sprang up, like whispers and faint reminders.

He thought of the two lives that lay a few hundred feet behind him, half buried in rubble. He thought of the life he knew was facing danger in Afghanistan, where a Gestalt team was undoubtedly ripping through NEST’s meager forces. And he thought about all of the lives that he loved who were facing unknown dangers far away, dangers he hadn't even heard about because of the communications blackout; his thoughts resounded in his processors and drowned out the idea of his own death like crashing waves.

Sooner than he had expected, he was crashing into the closest enemy and ripping into his chest. He hunted down the mech's spark, like the weapons of his faction had hunted down his own life, the lives of his friends, the lives of his family, for fifty years.

Vortex's clawed hands finally found purchase under armor plating and he tore at it until he could slam his charging cannon straight up against the mech's sparkchamber. He fired and let the raw plasma shatter the metal shell.

The third mech had finally broken away from the human soldiers, and Vortex barely brought his arms up in time to deflect a firing cannon aimed at his helm. There was gunfire from afar, from the humans, which did little to harm the Decepticon who slammed into him with brutal force, pushing back on Vortex's arms in an attempt to get to his throat. Suddenly, a slew of sabot powered rounds lit into the Decepticon's side with enough power to finally inflict real damage. The mech on top of Vortex howled, and the helicopter didn't wait.

With all his strength, Vortex threw himself up off the ground and flipped the Decepticon onto his back instead. Snarling, he shoved his hand into the mech's neck, breaking through the weakest metal, and crushed his throat. Energon sprayed out like rain while Vortex let his cannon touch the surface of the convulsing mech's chest, and fired three times.

Reaching his hands deep into the chest to find all the vital parts he could, Vortex pulled back hard and felt the satisfying death throes of a silenced mech beneath him.

This wasn't just about revenge for his kin.

He heaved himself up to his pedes, letting go of the corpse. At the edge of the field, the humans had pulled back to recuperate, but the fight was done there. Vortex looked at the sky and saw the human jets still engaged with the Seekers. All around was the sound of men shouting and distant missiles.

Vortex glared down at the mess that had been his opponent. "Don't touch what's mine," he said darkly, kicking the smoking corpse away.

Looking up again, he watched the aerial combatants tear up the sky. Further above, he could see two ships waging their own battle. At last, the Hyperion had arrived. What that meant for those on the ground wasn't clear, but Vortex didn't care about their larger problems.
He brought his leg down on the neck of the closest mech and blew his head off.

For now, this was his moment of vengeance.

0000

Los Angeles, California
11:01 AM

There had never been an easy way to surprise Megatron, and it seemed that Galvatron was no different. His strength as a warrior often blinded his enemies; they sometimes thought he was all brute force, without strategy or a quick mind. Optimus had learned long ago that Megatron's strength was most menacing when paired with his military prowess. Galvatron would know how to spot a trap far better than most.

El Segundo had been all but a ghost town that morning, as the human saying went. Now, it was on fire. Galvatron was unafraid of Optimus' weapons, and his vicious attack had Optimus moving backwards through the corporate district sooner than planned. With their leaders finally going helm-to-helm, the Autobots and the Decepticons alike flocked to the area to assist. Jolt, Prowl and several NEST teams aided Prime by shooting at Galvatron whenever they could get a clear shot, and by shooting down any other Decepticon that tried to get behind the Prime. Skyfire had taken to the air to engage the Seekers.

On the ground, Optimus remained focused on the purple menace swinging his way. He deflected a heavy hit and pushed back hard enough that he could advance into Galvatron's space. Galvatron had no problem lifting his mace again, sending clouds of sparks and the sound of metal ringing up into the air as he struck down at Optimus' blade.

Taking a chance, Optimus blocked another hit with his sword, and then aimed at Galvatron's pedes with his free arm cannon. He fired and Galvatron snarled as he stumbled back down the deserted city street. It was reassuring to note this was not a repeat of the disaster that had been Mission City. They could move without fear, fight openly without harming any civilians.

They were approaching the first checkpoint, Optimus noted through the flurry of violence as they approached an overpass. Galvatron was facing away from it as Prowl had instructed; his fury was directed only at Optimus.

He was, at least, until a barrage of sabot rounds caught Galvatron in the side unexpectedly. Optimus saw half a dozen men stationed in front of the opening to the subway system, firing up at the Decepticon leader. Although he took only minimal damage from the surprise assault, Galvatron was distracted long enough for Optimus to push the mace away and kick Galvatron back, sending the purple mech nearly stumbling backwards.

"You think you can use these worms against me, Optimus? !" Galvatron bellowed as he whirled around to fire at the other mech and then at the subway where the humans dove for cover. Optimus ducked low to avoid a fusion blast, hoping to keep Galvatron's weapons trained only on him—

And then, with a battle cry more suitable for a combiner, Sunstreaker launched himself off the bridge and brought his spear down into Galvatron's back. The Decepticon warlord roared in anger more than pain and Sunstreaker wisely jumped clear with his weapon withdrawn. Galvatron had no chance to unleash a counter attack on the yellow mech; Optimus opened fire on him furiously, as did Jolt. Screaming in fury, Galvatron transformed and shot away from the street. He was wounded, but far from out of the fight. Optimus kept his optics on the air, watching and trying to keep his radar focused on Galvatron as he regrouped his fliers.
Beneath him, his own team also regrouped, with some degree of confusion. The humans had been focused on Galvatron naturally, but once he left, the NEST soldiers in the area realized there was a new Autobot among them that had not previously been there.

"Sunstreaker? !" Epps exclaimed, shocked. That reaction was justified; according to NEST knowledge, the yellow frontliner should be overseas.

Jolt didn't miss a beat. "How'd China treat you, Sunshine?" he asked loudly as he hurled a grenade toward the nearest approaching 'Con.

"Didn't like the food," Sunstreaker shot back, surprisingly responsive to the joke. He was obviously enjoying the battle. He marched up to Prowl and Optimus, nodding to both. "Sirs."

Epps continued to gawk and Prowl looked at him blankly before shrugging. Optimus kept a smile behind his mask; hiding Sunstreaker among the streets of Los Angeles seemed tricky to the Master Sergeant, but was child's play to a mech like Prowl.

"We had to give the Decepticons reason to believe we sent most of our fighters away," the tactician said simply. He grasped Sunstreaker's shoulder briefly before pushing him toward Optimus. "Give Prime cover."

"You can count on it," the yellow frontliner growled. He nodded to Prime, waiting for his move first.

"What other surprises you got planned, Prowl?" Epps demanded, not quite accusing.

"Enough," the tactician replied bluntly. He looked up at the nearest Autobots. "Get moving!"

Optimus nodded to Epps and watched as the humans scrambled to move to their scheduled positions. They had to make sure they kept the fighting contained. The Air Force would do their best to move the Decepticon fliers further into El Segundo, toward the ocean and away from the edges of the evacuated zone. Optimus set his sights on a golf course less than ten blocks away, knowing Galvatron would seek him out, angrier and more dangerous than ever.

Jolt and Sunstreaker stayed at his side as they broke from the humans and followed Prowl's directives. Galvatron was circling back and there were more Decepticons, both fliers and grounders, headed toward them. Another human squad half a mile away would be assembling closer to provide rear support once Galvatron landed. The Decepticons knew they were hiding troops all over the place now, but they could do nothing against one of humanity's greatest assets, which was their sheer numbers.

::Galvatron is circling toward the Plaza El Segundo,:: Trailbreaker suddenly said, urging them to move quicker.

The Plaza was a shopping center just across the Pacific Coast Highway from a refinery. It would provide an open area for their troops to have a proper battle with the Decepticons. Prowl quickly began to shuffle men toward the area, and Optimus and his group sped up.

::Soundwave has been sighted!:: a NEST soldier radioed. ::He's with Galvatron!::

What that meant, Optimus wasn't sure. The moment they entered the parking lot, they saw Galvatron touch down on top of a small separate building; Optimus saw Soundwave settling to his pedes right behind the purple warlord. Transforming, the Autobots had their weapons out and ready; Decepticons arrived and a tense standoff began. Optimus waited, knowing Galvatron would make the first move. They had to wait for their own back-up to arrive. Prowl was only four blocks away with more human soldiers. Another team was regrouping two blocks behind the Decepticons—
"What's Soundwave doing?" Jolt asked quietly, sounding uneasy as they watched the two Decepticons up on the roof of the building. The silver technopath behind Galvatron was as impassive as ever. There was no telling what he was thinking, or what he was planning.

Several hundred yards away, Skyfire landed in the street. He was staring intensely at the organized Decepticons. His entire frame seemed to quiver as he edged forward, closer than any of the other Autobots dared. Silence permeated the air, save for the distant sound of battle only a mile away now.

"Prime!" Galvatron roared. He was not the least bit intimidated by the extra Autobots. He focused on Optimus and grinned. "Just like old times, isn't this? Your pathetic weaklings against the elite under my command."

Behind him, Soundwave moved slowly, visor ambiguous as light glinted off its surface. Optimus found himself watching that mech more closely than he watched Galvatron. Silently, Soundwave stepped up behind his leader.

The other Decepticons looked up when Prowl and his team arrived. Several Decepticon grounders were ready to attack and Optimus charged his cannon.

Galvatron raised his fist and bellowed out, "Soundwave, open fire—"

His mass hid his true speed perfectly. Soundwave closed the distance between him and his leader, only a sparse few feet, and the second Galvatron turned to face him, Soundwave already had a five-foot blade jammed into the weakest part of Galvatron's chestplates.

With crushing force, Soundwave had his ex-leader down, using his strength to pin the giant as Galvatron struggled to grab at the blade holding him down. Optimus nearly charged forward on instinct when he saw the Decepticons nearest to them open fire on Soundwave. The Autobots quickly fired back in support and when the two Decepticons went down, and the others further back hesitated with their weapons raised, they were at another standoff.

"Soundwave…? !" Galvatron gasped, barely able to keep the blade from going any deeper. It must have pierced his spark casing; the only bad thing was that it hadn't actually destroyed the spark.

"Designation: Soundwave," the silver giant on top of him replied. He sounded strained and his limbs quaked as he pushed back against his former leader. "Status: Neutral. Survivor of Galvatron's future genocide."

Optimus stared, awed. So, this had been their plan. Turning, he saw Skyfire rush forward, stopping short of the building. The shuttle was gazing up at the sight before them with a mixture of worry and muted elation. No wonder Skyfire had been adamant that Soundwave had to be at Galvatron's side; any change to the plan and this moment would not have happened, not without a major hitch.

It didn't take long for Galvatron to understand. Rage contorted his faceplates. "You betray me? !" he snarled.


The air grew even more tense as the seconds passed, with the Decepticons all too willing to open fire on Soundwave, and the Autobots ready to fire back. Optimus didn't dare to move, knowing that anything could set off an intense close-combat situation. But they couldn't just leave Soundwave up
there exposed, either.

Slight movement across from him catching his attention, he saw Skyfire smiling. "Well done, friend," the shuttle said quietly. His optics were only on Soundwave.

Optimus glanced to Prowl and knew they had to make their move. The Decepticons outnumbered them, but if Soundwave could keep Galvatron pinned long enough for the Autobots to help him finish the tyrant off, the battle would be practically won. Without any of the generals left to lead them, the Decepticons would crumble.

As Optimus turned back to the tableau in front of him, he saw Galvatron's hand let go of the blade holding him down, and in one swift move, Soundwave's chestplates exploded into fire and plasma. Jolt gasped and Sunstreaker opened fire on the Decepticon masses, who returned his fire.

Optimus strained to see what was happening before he tried to enter the fray. His optics found Soundwave falling backwards, one hand reaching for his chest. Galvatron emerged from a cloud of smoke, and Optimus tried—and failed—to move quickly enough.

Effortlessly, the fusion cannon broke through the weakened chest armor and ignited into Soundwave's spark. Skyfire screamed.

"NO!"

0000

They had come a long way. Farther than they had ever expected, Skyfire thought. They had done the impossible by interfering as much as they could. When they had met Perceptor, Beachcomber, Hook, Scrapper, Scalpel, and First Aid decades ago in the mountains of France, Skyfire had openly scoffed at Perceptor's optimism that this suicidal plan would work. Soundwave had been the one to convince him that it was the only way. Skyfire had only agreed to it after he had helped to build the machine and had seen that it might just work.

The scientists had been forced to make a heavy, spark-wrenching decision about who would go and who would make the gruesome sacrifice of their sparks. Skyfire had not wanted to go, because he felt only the better of them should have the opportunity to survive. Certainly, they could have also died a horrible death through the machine, or on the nearly uninhabitable Cybertron, but Skyfire had always been a coward. He had wanted to do, as a last choice, one unselfish thing.

But they had chosen him for the same reason they had chosen Soundwave: they were the largest, the strongest, and they came from opposing factions but were united in a single goal. They had all the qualities necessary to face a past not yet marred by the touch of the drones. Skyfire had begged Perceptor to change the minds of the others, but it was settled. The coward would live.

Soundwave had never been the most talkative of mechs, even after almost a decade of building and living with an eclectic mix of Autobot and Decepticon scientists. He didn't need words, though; Skyfire had learned that early in their acquaintance, just after they met in Lorraine. Soundwave had lost his offspring, his symbiotes, and had nearly lost his life to Galvatron. He hadn't needed words to convey his pain. Eventually, Soundwave had shared his story with Skyfire, and it was just as long and dark as any other mech's story during the length of the great war. Soundwave later told him he was grateful to have found someone who would listen and not judge him. Skyfire had felt the honor of his friend's trust, although he had realized long before that he could never judge another mech, Decepticon or no, for their past. They had all made mistakes. There hadn't been a right side to this awful war since the fall of Praxus.
So they had accepted this mission, together, and suddenly they were again on the field of war as allies. Skyfire didn't know if fighting his ex-teammates and subordinates mattered to Soundwave, but the masked mech never said anything. Skyfire kept his optics on his opponents, using his rifle and cannons in a way he had always dreaded.

But there was no time for the pacifism of a scientist, he mused; he had lost that title when he had believed Starscream's stories of Decepticon order and the promise of a peaceful society once more. He was a soldier. He was a traitor and turncoat. He was a lesser mech compared to someone like Soundwave, who had never strayed from his ideals until it had utterly destroyed him.

Today, they both redeemed their sparks. Today, they saved the world that had chosen them so delicately to survive. This was their moment. This was what six lives lost and fifty years between had led to.

The least Skyfire could do was win.

But winning was something that was beyond his personal grasp, and now beyond the grasp of his friend, as Galvatron's cannon ripped through Soundwave's spark chamber.

"Soundwave!" he yelled, rushing forward. A rare feeling of terror flooded him; he had been numb to the sensation for decades. It all came back and it almost killed him right then and there.

Chaos. War. It all came back. Galvatron fled to the back of his army as the Autobots surged forward yet again to fight. Skyfire didn't care about any of them and ducked low in order to reach his friend. His spark sang in grief and joy. Galvatron was wounded and on the run, so that deserved joy.

But the grief was overwhelming. Skyfire shot a too-close Decepticon before finally turning and finding the only mech that mattered to him on the field of battle. Soundwave had fallen off the low building, and was braced against the wall, his mask still ajar, so Skyfire could see the pained grimace on his faceplates. He could see the gaping hole in his chest, where his symbiotes had once sheltered. There would be no recovering this time. Skyfire braced his own spark.

Slowly, he crouched close and stared deeply into Soundwave's familiar red visor. Soundwave stared back, and for a long second, the sounds of the battle faded into silence.

"Oh… my friend." Skyfire reached out gently and grasped his uninjured shoulder. Their EM fields entwined with familiarity. "You are dying."

He said it out loud for his own benefit; otherwise, he could not believe it. Soundwave said nothing, but the slight tremor radiating through his frame stopped. The pain was palpable in his EM field, meshing perfectly with Skyfire's, full of grief. Soundwave tried to lift his hand, but failed. Skyfire reached down and clasped the hand as he tried to gently lower the mech to the ground for comfort. Soundwave hissed through a malfunctioning vocalizer, but lay still on the ground as Skyfire hovered over him.

"Perceptor was right to choose us to come here," Skyfire said quietly, smiling through his own agony. He leaned down closer. "We made all the right mistakes, didn't we?"

They had gone through so much to get here. They had done their part, or at least, Soundwave had. Skyfire had to keep fighting, until Prime or Galvatron won. Skyfire had faith the Autobots would win, but until then…

Beneath his touch, Soundwave's systems began to quiet. Part of Skyfire's spark wanted to go with him, but he couldn't. Not yet. Shaking, Skyfire kept smiling in hope that was the last thing of comfort.
he could give to his last, best friend.

"Rest now, my dear friend," Skyfire said, gently taking up Soundwave's hand again. He leaned closer and touched their helms. "I will wait with you."

Soundwave said nothing, but he clutched Skyfire's hand. The grip was weak, growing fainter, but it was there. Like it had been in the dredges of an apocalyptic Europe, when they had all but given up hope wandering its desolate landscape—that hand had been there for as long as Skyfire's weary processors could still compute. Anything before it had ceased to matter the moment they decided to survive as one, instead of being alone.

Skyfire waited there, until the hand fell slack. Even then, he remained seated with his silent companion until the explosions grew nearer once more.

Then, he rose. Skyfire looked out at the violence and went to face it, alone.

0000

The battle had devolved from herding the Decepticons toward the ocean into a full out melee fray in a matter of seconds. Optimus had spent several minutes simply cutting through any Decepticons who came close and keeping them away from the humans, who did their best to only fire their weapons at the Decepticons.

::Optimus!:: Sunstreaker shouted, which was all the warning he had, when Galvatron appeared on the other side of a Decepticon that Optimus had just killed, his claws going for the Prime's helm.

Optimus ducked and fired at the bloodied mech. Galvatron took the hit, but didn't stop. His mace slammed into Optimus' shoulder and immediate warnings flooded Optimus' HUD as the plating on his shoulder shattered. He was flung to the side, straight into one of the refinery's storage tanks.

He scrambled to his pedes, thankful that no continued attack had followed the assault. His sensors found Galvatron walking toward him slowly. Galvatron was ignoring the rest of the battle; his optics were only on Optimus, looking greedy and fearless.

"Optimus..." Galvatron grinned madly. He gestured around, though the battle was now far behind them. "What a show indeed. You never used to be about theatrics. Soundwave was such a nice little twist."

Optimus glared. "You need to stop this, Galvatron. You will not win," he warned as he stood up properly to face his nemesis.

"You think you'll win?" Galvatron goaded. "With what? Those time travelers?"

They edged back further from the main section of the city. The refinery and the associated electrical power plant spread out over a huge distance, providing both a dangerous platform and an empty battlefield for them to fight on. Optimus allowed Galvatron to push him back into the maze of metal; they needed to get to the ocean.

Despite the battle being waged in his name, Galvatron did not seem concerned about time. "Wherever are your anomalies?" the purple mech asked, energon running down his chin. "The ones who traveled through space and time to get here?"

Optimus kept a close watch on Galvatron's legs, watching for a sign the other mech would charge him again. "And how do you know of them, Galvatron?"
Galvatron sneered. "You should know. We've both been privy to this mystery of nature. You from your little scientists. Me from our great benefactor."

"The Fallen," Optimus spat. He usually wouldn't have let Galvatron, or his predecessor, see his anger so easily, but it didn't seem to faze Galvatron now.

The purple mech seemed amused as they circled each other slowly. "Such a fascinating story, his. Even if it is just a story, listening to the messenger of a god will give you such interesting details," he said, innocent voice clashing with the glint in his optics. "It makes me wonder if the intelligence Soundwave gave myself and the Fallen is accurate now, but if it is... oh, what a twist."

"What are you talking about?" Optimus demanded, the unease growing exponentially. What information had Soundwave given the two of those monsters?

"Is it true that you shipped all of those anomalies off to Europe to hide? To give you some meager form of information on the drones?" Galvatron asked. He couldn't feel the shudder that went through Optimus' spark, but his grin seemed to grow as if he could. "How quaint... what's the human saying? Putting all your eggs in one basket?"

It was impossible—or so Optimus had thought. He knew from Prowl's plans that Soundwave had fed the Decepticons with false, and sometimes true, bits of tactical information about who was to be where that day of battle. They had surprised them with fighters like Optimus and Sunstreaker being in places they shouldn't have been, but Optimus only had a vague recall of what Prowl had said about Wiesbaden. Only Barnaby Rancourt, Thundercracker and Jazz were there—weren't they?

And if their enemies thought all of the time travelers were in Germany... what did that mean? Optimus waited, as his enemy clearly was ready to say more.

"When he discovered your scientists off-planet had figured out his teleporting tricks, he just had to tell me. I then shared with him that little story the helicopter traitor had told me. The one called Vortex," Galvatron explained, grinning. "How curious, those details matched up. Now, he's just dying to get a chance to talk to one of them. He probably already has, in this little party you've sprung."

The Fallen knew? About the time travelers? Optimus wasn't sure what that meant, but the way Galvatron grinned made him feel immensely uneasy. He had to warn the other squads. The time travelers were all over the planet now—there was no telling where the Fallen would be headed. If he was focusing on Germany, that would put those three plus any other NEST soldiers on base in particular danger.

He could not live with himself if he had led them all to be targets of the Fallen, a creature he was now very certain was no more natural than Galvatron was.

Galvatron raised his guns, his mirth blending flawlessly into a rage born from insanity. "I wonder what they hoped to obtain. Soundwave was a fool, thinking he could take revenge on me! I own him! I own all of you!" he roared, cannons hissing. "This world is mine! It always was! No matter what world, what time—it is mine, or no one shall have it at all!"

He finally moved, charging toward Optimus as his fusion cannon discharged. Optimus ducked and rolled to the side, using the cover of the white containers. He lunged out from behind the towering structure and fired back at the Decepticon leader. Galvatron took a hit, but recovered swiftly. All of his calm had disappeared, as if it had never existed in the first place. In the place of the gleeful lunatic came a raging, unstoppable monster.
"I will burn this place to embers—drive them to extinction!" Galvatron shouted over the thundering noise of his assault as he fired again and again at the Autobot leader. "Life will cease if I am not the one to master it!"

The Earth burning, destroyed, all because of their race's mistakes—it was an image never far from Optimus' processors as he dealt with the war his people had dragged to this once unmarred planet.

A stray blast sent the piped units next to Optimus up into an explosive fireball. It threw him far, colliding with debris and then falling onto gravel. His windshield shattered, and for a long second, his video feed was reduced to static.

The ground beneath him shuddered from the explosive battle behind them and, he was sure, from Galvatron's footsteps, as the titan came closer. The Autobot heaved himself upright.

Pain lanced through him, but Optimus stood as Galvatron approached. The Prime felt not fear, but an overwhelming sense of resolution.

"You will not take Earth," he swore, unsheathing his smoldering blade again.

Not like Cybertron. Not like their people, scattered to the stars in ill-wrought diaspora. Humanity would not suffer the same fate. Prime had failed his own people and caused the destruction of so many more innocent worlds—

But it would end here. Earth would not fall.

He closed the distance between them, knowing the fight would remain a constant chase if he allowed Galvatron the distance to use his gun. Close combat would decide this. Galvatron attempted to fire at the Prime, but brought up his hands to block Optimus' blade. The heated sword cut into the armored hands and Optimus used that and his weight to push back hard. He tucked his foot behind Galvatron's knee and sent the warlord sprawling.

The purple mace swung out and hooked into Optimus' side, stalling him. The spikes ripped into his armor, slicing up energon lines liberally as Galvatron rolled away, yanking the mace with him. Optimus flinched, but didn't back off. He brought his blade down into Galvatron's shoulder and Galvatron let out a bellow as the blade cut down to what had to be a strut.

Pulling away, Optimus kicked the caved in chestplates and Galvatron fell back. A purple arm turned hastily into a gun and Optimus knew that remaining in the open courted death with the infamous weapon.

He did not back away. He charged and fired rapidly. He returned the one processor-shattering blast his shoulder took—which promptly sent his HUD a dozen warnings of energon loss and armor lockdown, all of which he ignored—and in a matter of seconds, he was on top of the fallen Decepticon, his foot pinning the other mech down, as he obliterated his chestplates to the point where there was no telling where the mech began and the molten metal ended.

Optimus dared to lean back, if only to find a moment of clarity and see what his assault had earned him. Galvatron had ceased attempting to fire back and his mace was limp on the ground. The purple mech's chest gushed energon, which seared the ground below them.

Systems overheated and pain threatening to send him into a lockdown, Optimus found himself waiting for his enemy to make his next move.

That would not happen. Not that day, or any day after.
Galvatron's optics spasmed, shorting out. The mech was more scrap than alive.

"Op-timus…!" the garbled voice said. Not a plea. Not a surrender. He wasn't sure what it was.

It didn't matter in the amount of time it took for the spell to break, and for the Prime to finally step back.

Optimus raised his cannon to the broken chestplates, and stared into his brother's optics one last time.

"Goodbye, Megatron," he said.

He felt the recoil of the shot. He heard the shattering sound of the blast rip through the air, and he heard the devastating effect on the already ruined purple armor. He saw the light of life fade from his brother's faceplates, and it was eerily familiar to Optimus as he saw it happen for the second time as the defiled spark was finally returned the Matrix.

It didn't feel real. Optimus stood there for as long as he dared, and wondered in a vague sense of absence, when it would feel that way.

That small moment was the only thing he allowed himself. He stepped back and knew he was needed elsewhere.

::Optimus to Prowl:: he sent out. He hated how tired he sounded.

Prowl answered immediately. ::Sir?::

::Report to Lennox when we reestablish contact with Wiesbaden:: Optimus shuttered his visor. ::Galvatron is dead. The battle is won here:::

Now… he had to make sure the rest of their army survived.

::Alert the time travelers stationed there, and have them evacuated:: he began, turning shakily. He could see that the ground teams still needed help.

Prowl hesitated on the line. ::Sir? My plans need for Jazz to be there—::

::All of them, Prowl:: Optimus felt immediate dread once he thought about the Fallen. ::I fear they are in grave danger. The enemy is hunting them down and we cannot protect them there:::

Prowl fell silent.

::Then everything is going according to plan:: the Praxian said, in the grimmest, heaviest voice Optimus had heard in a long time.

Prowl sent him the remainder of the battle plans, with sections he had not read before carefully notated. Tucked away in the Wiesbaden files, the facts were clear. The ingenuity of his strategist was frightening and, ultimately, irrefutable.

Optimus looked out at the battle beyond his position, spark weary.

::Primus help them:::

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Washington, DC
NEST Security Bunker
The global communications network was in shambles. Keller had barked out orders for someone to fix the damn lines, but it wasn't anything they could do right now. *Nemesis* was rapidly destroying their satellites, even as it dropped below them in its fall towards Earth. They could still hear chatter from Los Angeles and Boa Vista, but there was silence from Europe and Keller knew the teams overseas were scrambling to get their Morse code operations up.

South America was in trouble, but they had thankfully had foresight to place carriers in the Gulf that could send aerial aid. That had reduced the support level they could provide for Los Angeles, but from the last thing Keller had heard, the battle was proceeding as planned there. The team in China was ripping through drones without any reported causalities. Keller was more worried for Afghanistan, where the last report out had been an alarming one about a special Decepticon team arriving. Wiesbaden had also been worryingly silent.

For his part, the Director was focusing most of his attention on the skies. *Nemesis* wasn't about to drop down over New York, but their position in orbit gave the aliens the opportunity to launch teams down all over the globe. They had to bring that ship down, or at least give the Decepticons something to worry about, but they couldn't do that alone.

They had ASAT on their side, which turned out to be more useful than their military experts had ever expected. They could get strikes on the alien ship once it reached the stratosphere, which its current trajectory seemed to suggest it was aiming for. After that, they could use their own jets to fire upon the ship and any incoming Seekers.

"Director," Maggie Madsen said from her computer, turning to him with those big headphone-mic things lifted away from her ears. "We're receiving an incoming transmission from the *Hyperion*.

"Finally in range, hmm?" Keller muttered. He stared up at the large overhead screen expectantly. "Patch them through."

The distance between their position on Earth and the ship beyond *Nemesis*, plus the encryption of the video feed, made the final image grainy and jumpy, but in a matter of seconds, Keller was face to face with the inside of an alien starship.

Dead center on the screen, a huge Autobot looked back at the humans. He was blue and red primarily, but with far more white armor than Prime had. The mech carried an air of authority and propriety, albeit he looked a bit friendlier than Prowl. The background was blurred, but they could still see mechs moving and hear the distant sounds of the Cybertronian language being spoken.

Keller stared back, taking in the new alien. This was a face to remember, considering it had to be the Autobot level of general or something of equal respect. "My name is John Keller, Director of National Intelligence and chief NEST supervisor," he said.

"I am called Ultra Magnus, commander of the Hyperion and its forces," the blue-and-white mech replied, accent missing. He tilted his head and smiled, however, clearly recalling mannerisms befitting the human culture. "It is an honor to put a face with your name, Director."

Keller snorted. "I take it you've heard of me, then?"

"You are not as terrifying as Tactics Officer Prowl suggested," Ultra Magnus replied, mouth quirking upwards. He inclined his head and got back to business. "In less than a joor we will be within striking distance of Nemesis."
"Eight minutes," Maggie whispered to his side, translating the term. Keller nodded.

"We need to organize our mutual troops to hit them hardest," he replied. "NATO and the United States are sending out as many jets as we can to fire on the Decepticon ship. Our vessels can only enter the lower half of the stratosphere, however, so our strikes may not be as effective."

Ultra Magnus nodded. "We can use the attacks as a way to distract and perhaps disorient our enemy," he concluded.

The plan was to push Nemesis down further into the atmosphere to give the human jets the chance to strike Nemesis. Currently, it was working. Despite being ready for the Hyperion's arrival, the mechs on Nemesis were beginning to fall back under the pressure of the other starship's own crew, which had flown out to attack the Seekers.

"With our combined attacks, we may be able to limit their impact on the fighting happening on Earth's surface," Ultra Magnus explained.

"Right," Keller agreed, knowing their troops around the globe would appreciate that, especially down South, where Nemesis had the best launching distance. "If you need more jets, or space, or time, you have it. We're running close feedback with the crews in Los Angeles, China and Brazil, but we've lost contact with both Wiesbaden and Kandahar, hopefully only temporarily."

"We have already sent the Protectobots down to Earth to help in your Kandahar region," Ultra Magnus replied, as if that should have been a reassurance. While extra mechs down on Earth would be a blessing, the new title deserved scrutiny. If he had learned anything those last few years, it was not to misjudge special Cybertronian titles.

"And they are?" Keller asked, brow narrowed slightly.

Ultra Magnus glanced to someone off screen on his side. "A Gestalt team," he offered, the term still alien to Keller.

"Very big mechs," Maggie whispered, a little meek. She and Glen shared a worried expression that didn't sit well with Keller.

Great. "Thank you for that, then. If you hear anything from our teams there, please forward it along."

"Of course," Ultra Magnus replied. He inclined his helm. "We must cut the line, Director. Nemesis has begun to shift its position in order to fire upon our ship."

Keller nodded stiffly. "Good luck to your crew, Ultra Magnus." He didn't relish their position in the air like that.

"Likewise, Director," the mech replied genially before the line was ended.

The bunker was filled with chatter after the screen went dark. Keller was left standing on the upper levels of the communication center, staring out at nothing as he considered their position now. While their forces were operating under strained conditions and lacked a strong singular army, they did have international air support. Keller trusted those teams to operate well even while isolated. They had planned for this contingency.

"Director, sir?" Glen asked from his computer station, two boxes of donuts already eaten and put aside. His unprofessionalism was excusable considering the amazing ability he had to monitor incoming Cybertronian data. "We've got NORAD on the line. What should we tell them to do with the Autobot ship here now?"
Keller's gaze shifted toward the huge wall of television and computer screens. Lots of the charts and data were things he didn't have the time or patience to understand, but he could see NORAD's visual feed of the two alien space craft moving desperately close together in the atmosphere over the planet. He could see fire being exchanged between the two massive starships. The Hyperion was a beige color while Nemesis was a sleek blackness that almost seemed like a vortex had opened up against the pale blue sky.

Nemesis was yet another symbol of the Decepticon's lack of respect for Earth's life, another sign of those monsters' desire for destruction. They had come to Earth thinking humanity would simply roll over and die under the threat of such weaponry.

They had picked the wrong planet. Keller clenched his fist and turned back to face his waiting crew.

"Have them call SECNAV," he said coldly, "and tell them we're going to need the Kearsarge operational from the Joint Region Marianas, pronto."

They had picked the wrong damn planet.

0000

Brazil
3:25 PM

Well, this had been quite the day. Rachel had spent the last twenty minutes trying to get through to another allied base on her radio, but gave up in order to do the most meager medical check-up on Bluestreak while he was still lying there on the ground. Her attempts would have made Kass laugh, or Ratchet yell at her, but Rachel was vaguely certain the Praxian wasn't actually in danger of dying. Just out cold while the world around them exploded and eventually dissolved into an uneasy silence punctuated by the screaming injured and soldiers struggling for order.

They had good news by the time the majority of the fighting stopped. The Hyperion was now visible in the air above them to fight back against Nemesis. Rachel had gotten so lost in their position on the ground that she could no longer tell which one was which, but that didn't matter. She couldn't see the fighting, but she knew there was full out war going on in the sky. With the Decepticon warship distracted, they might not have to worry about more mechs launching to attack them.

The Decepticons that had assailed them had been neutralized, finally. The Air Force had played tag with the Seekers for far longer than Rachel had liked, but after losing seven human jets, all the Decepticon fliers were down. The three grounders had also been taken care of, by a combination of the Air Force, the ground soldiers with sabot weaponry, but of course, mostly because Vortex had gone batshit insane.

Rachel wished she could record things in her visor like the mechs could, because there was no way she'd be able to describe that fight later to the others. She settled for sitting there quietly next to Bluestreak's prone form while watching Vortex stomp around, shooting things that didn't quite look dead enough, and talking with soldiers as they desperately tried to reconnect with NEST command.

They had their share of bad news, too, she supposed. Like the fact they had no idea what the hell they were going to do after this, such as go after the drones. The city was in danger from mechs launching to attack, and with Bluestreak down they only had two "mechs" helping out. More like one and a half, Rachel mused about herself.

Just as she was considering getting up to tell Vortex to stop finding new ways to desecrate corpses, she heard the telltale sound of a mech booting up. Gasping softly, Rachel scrambled around in her
seated position to half-crawl on top of Bluestreak. Seeing any of their mechanical friends down for the count was terrifying; they looked dead when they were unconscious.

It took a minute longer than she had expected, but with a flicker, green optics lit up the dark gray face she was staring intensely at. Rachel gripped Bluestreak's side.

"Blue?" she asked, unable to keep the fear from her voice.

The gray mech stared at her for a moment without comprehending, but that passed. Bluestreak seemed surprised, which to Rachel was a lot better than being dead.


Rachel dared to smirk. "Well, there's a loss," she teased through the last dregs of her panic. She had no idea what that was, but at least he was conscious. She rapped her knuckles on an undamaged part of his armor. "Scared me, dude. What else is wrong?"

Bluestreak tried to lift his head, but couldn't get that far. "Ca-an't move my leg. Energon loss has s-stopped," he said. He looked around them warily, noticing the obvious destruction and far off fighting. "What'd I miss?"

Besides a building falling on top of him, Vortex going Rambo on three 'Cons all by himself, and losing communication with all the other international teams…

"…Nothing, Blue," Rachel said. She sighed softly. "Nothing at all. Vortex will be right back."

"Why are we wai-aiting he-ere?" Bluestreak asked, confused.

"'Cause this site's done. We're waiting for more orders, like to evac to another spot," Rachel replied. She settled in further against his side. "They're gonna need us elsewhere."

Bluestreak was either still booting up, or some other injury was making him slower than usual. "Why?"

Rachel shrugged. "The war's not over yet."

For a minute, Rachel hoped they could continue to rest. She wondered how they would handle moving Bluestreak. He'd probably have to stay here, but she knew he'd put up a fight about being left behind. She'd rather stay with him, but they had to hunt down more of the drones.

She wanted nothing more than to call Jazz, but the communication lines were still down. She hoped they were okay. She hoped they'd be okay where they were, too.

"Whaaa-t was th-a-at?"

Rachel glanced over at Bluestreak, exhausted. "What was what?"

"Th-the li-ight," Bluestreak said, which made no sense to Rachel, but when he froze, she did, too.

Bluestreak was now staring upwards with a dazed expression, though that could have been from his injuries.

"…Look," he said, breathless in a way a robot shouldn't have been. Rachel didn't begrudge him that; she couldn't find breath in her own lungs when she obliged the order and gazed upwards toward the two ships tangoing thousands of miles above in the stratosphere.
Like a brilliant star in daylight, a fireball had taken over much of one of the visible ships. Rachel felt part of herself weaken. The other wasn't exploding. There was just one left.

"That's… which one is that?" she asked hoarsely. Mild panic coursed through her when she realized she couldn't tell which ship was which even with her visor. "Blue, which ship is that? !"

Bluestreak was trying to figure it out. Mechs' sight was better than humans', but he couldn't see that far away. "I… I can't tell…" he said, alarmed. His optics flickered from internal communication as he tried to ask others most likely. "There's… there's no communication with the Hyperion. Th-that's what the soldiers are saying over the comms. But…we couldn't have… they couldn't have lost so fast. Could they?"

His desperate question did nothing to soothe Rachel's own fears. She turned back to the sky and watched as what looked like pieces of the damaged starship began to fall away like miniature stars as well. From their position on the ground, they were only insignificant dots. There was no way to tell if they had just lost the Hyperion, or if their enemies had been the ones to suffer the loss. There was no way to tell if they had just lost the war, or if they were already dead.

She didn't pray. Even if she wanted to, there was no one to pray to. No deity deserved her trust.

In a moment of weakness, however, Rachel bowed her head and clenched her hands together.

She didn't pray.

She just hoped. She hoped with everything she had.

0000

Wiesbaden, Germany
8:30 PM

The drones had emerged from their hiding spots just before they had landed. Wiesbaden had been almost completely evacuated at the time, so the drones were forced to go deep into the city to hunt down prey. They weren't sure where the drones had originated from, possibly the surrounding forests, but that was irrelevant right now. The initial step the NEST squad arriving there had to take was to push the drones back. Thundercracker was all too willing to help.

It was only him, Jazz and Hoist providing Autobot support. They did have an organized, international army backing them up, thankfully, so that was a huge benefit. Thundercracker had taken over the air assault and, quite like they had only a year ago in their apocalyptic Europe, lured the drones back for the ground team to blast to pieces. Even without more mechs, the humans were quick learners. The first two swarms were dispatched with few casualties on NEST's side. Thundercracker considered that a success.

However, it was a constant struggle to cut through the drones, which seemed to spawn from the German landscape like they were peeling off from shadows cast by the mountains and trees. Thundercracker had barely found the time to orient himself—they were nearly three miles from the city center now—when he realized the last skirmish was over and his team was regrouping below on a stretch of highway.

Dead drones littering the asphalt, several vehicles and persons stood out as Thundercracker approached. Jazz was taking two energon cubes from the back of one of the trucks, and Thundercracker made his descent. He landed a few feet away and nodded when Jazz noticed him.
::Hey, babe, how's it going?: the saboteur asked, using a private channel for whatever reason. It was most likely an attempt not to annoy (or disturb) the nearby humans, who were eying the Seeker nervously, even now. Thundercracker ignored them.

::I'm fine. You?: Thundercracker asked, noticing a few scratches along Jazz's side. Nothing lethal.

::Me an' Hoist have been holdin' up pretty well:. Jazz smirked as he handed a ration to the jet, and nodded his helm toward the human soldiers who were regrouping and reloading. ::Primus bless th' human who gave these guys sabot rounds, though.::

Thundercracker hummed in agreement. He had never expected the humans to be a huge benefit in this war, but he knew now that when they were equipped to face their enemies, they weren't too bad off. He appreciated their support now, especially the Air Force, even if they refused to actually use his designation when speaking over the airwaves. The "NBE"-crap was getting annoying.

Accepting the energon ration, Thundercracker chugged it. ::We should have the bond open,: he said abruptly.

Jazz, as expected, sent him a startled look. ::Are ya nuts? I'd distract me.:.

::Maybe,: Thundercracker definitely noticed the uneasy waves coming from Jazz's patchy block. He needed practice to block it properly. The Seeker caught Jazz's gaze again. ::You're hiding something.:.

He had felt the nervous twitches for the last day. Jazz was good at keeping secrets, but the bond made it difficult. Jazz seemed intent on keeping whatever was bothering him to himself, but Thundercracker was patient.

There was silence for a moment between them, even as the rest of the military kept moving around the two mechs. ::Yeah, I am. Classified part o' th' mission,: Jazz admitted at length. He frowned when Thundercracker glared at him. ::Don't look at me like that, I'm still a part of Special Ops.:.

::Is it going to get us killed?: Thundercracker asked, wary.

Jazz snorted. ::If it works, then I'm takin' me, you an' Rachel t' Disney Land or somethin' t' celebrate.:.

Thundercracker snarled and hurled his cube aside. ::Oh, shut up.:.

::Yer just mad ya won't fit on any of th' rides,: Jazz told him simply. He suddenly danced to the side, and the sound of cannons firing took over the air. ::Pay attention, love!:.

Turning, Thundercracker felt a mixed surge of irritation and weariness flood his spark when he saw yet another swarm rise up over a park. Where the frag were they coming from? Not that it mattered, he reasoned. NEST would kill them all anyway.

He transformed and fired on the miserable pack, sending the metal beasts scattering. Fire lit up the sky from below and Thundercracker narrowly dodged friendly fire; stupid human weapons. He flew higher and brought down any stray drones. They screeched and tried to get close enough to him to tear him apart, but Thundercracker blew them out of the air before they got close.

Just like old times, he thought. Except for the army backing them up, of course.

He saw another cloud of easily recognizable drones surge up from a distant knoll, but they weren't headed his way. Thundercracker sped past the team on the ground to get a closer look. The drones
were circling back parallel to them, clearly aiming to hunt down any more civilians in the nearby suburbs. Distant screaming and yelling could have been from soldiers, but Thundercracker didn't get his hopes up that they'd be able to handle the situation.

A mile from Jazz's position, Thundercracker quickly descended when he spotted another squad of soldiers. Only a few were NEST, but none of them reacted badly when they saw him come in to transform and land; they knew to expect him.

He found their leader quickly; the middle-aged man was probably of some average rank, and immediately froze when Thundercracker landed on his pedes to get closer to the humans. None of the soldiers were pleased to see him, though none went for their weapons.

"The drones have moved further toward the suburbs of the city," Thundercracker said to the intimidated captain. It was pleasing that the soldier didn't run away when he spoke, at least.

"Ah—you. Thunder…cracker?" the man asked, hesitating. Not NEST, but American. He regained confidence when Thundercracker nodded in acknowledgement. "Thanks for backing us up earlier. The swarms keep choking back our jets."

Thundercracker nodded, dismissing the gratitude. He was getting used to the humans' need to think that he was doing this as an act of charity. He tried to focus on the mission.

"Any legion drones?" he asked. That was the term they were using for the combining worker drones Wildrider had fought back in California. They had only heard of a few instances where soldiers had confronted those singular beasts, which was actually bad news. They needed to take out the worker drones first, which had been the original plan, after all.

"No, none yet," the soldier replied. Thundercracker hissed lowly.

He decided to take to the air again as the soldiers began to relay the surveillance information to the other teams, hoping to spot more from the ground. They had to keep searching.

The sky was pouring rain and dark clouds blocked out any additional lighting from the moon or stars. Thundercracker could easily use his radar now (thanks to better energon), so he had no problems detecting drones.

Or other manners of creatures.

He saw them before any of the others did. Three fliers—a trine of Seekers—broke out of the clouds and started to add to the drones' firepower, shooting at something on the ground. Soldiers, probably. Thundercracker set his optics on the one moving away from his group.

::Seekers to the south!:: Hoist suddenly shouted over the comms, beating him to warning everyone in the area.

Thundercracker growled lowly and banked hard to catch up to the one closest to him. ::I'm on it::

He dropped down on the Decepticon swiftly and opened fire. The bullets tore streams of holes in the Seeker's armor. The mech tried to outpace Thundercracker, but it was in vain. Thundercracker started to initiate the protocols to unleash his sonic blast when—

The Decepticon flipped in the air and transformed. The move might have been an attempt to use gravity itself to outmaneuver Thundercracker, or perhaps he had thought the other Seeker wouldn't be crazy enough to drop down after him like Jazz might.
Unfortunately for the Decepticon, Thundercracker wasn't any more sane than Jazz was at that point. He transformed just as quickly and found himself free falling after the other mech, who began to fire haphazardly up at the blue jet. Thundercracker took two hits that more than grazed him, but he focused on getting ahold of the snarling Seeker who just then realized the folly of his plans.

Thundercracker felt part of his shoulder armor give when one of the blasts did hit him directly, but the pain was placed on a lower priority when he was in arm's reach of his opponent. Thundercracker snatched hold of the Decepticon and the two began to tumble faster out of the sky as they struggled in close combat.

"TRAITOR!" the Seeker screamed in Cybertronian as they fell. Thundercracker roared back and didn't let go. Over the open comms, the Decepticon kept screeching, ::They're here! The time travelers are here!::

Insolent mech. Thundercracker sank his servos in deep—until he reached wire and strut. He pulled back and the Seeker screamed as his arm was torn from his shoulder. The useless metal was flung aside; Thundercracker shoved his transforming arm into the gaping hole and fired three times, until molten metal sprayed his chestplates and the Seeker's screeching stopped. Yanking his hand back from the dead mech, Thundercracker kicked away into the sky.

He transformed at a hard angle, but pulled up just in time. Thundercracker strained his wings and transformation cog from the effort of fighting gravity. Although he managed to clear the trees, he didn't have enough altitude to continue his climb. In flurry of motion, he transformed back to root mode for a rough landing, his pedes sliding across the ground until they tore up the asphalt street.

Thundercracker glanced around and realized he had landed in the outer suburban reaches of the city. He could still hear the sounds of fighting, and the drones were still visible in the sky. It wasn't that far from the main road they had been following earlier. He couldn't see the other Seekers left in the air; had the Air Force taken care of them?

::TC, where'd you go?:: Jazz's voice broke into the comm. on their private channel. It was full of static. The Decepticons had never had that sort of interference ability before. It had to be the drones' fault, somehow.

::I'm alright. Had to handle one of the Seekers.:: Thundercracker looked to the skyline as he sent Jazz his coordinates. The rain was still pouring down on them. ::How are you?::

Without the full bond, it was startlingly quiet in his own mind, which bothered Thundercracker. It bothered him that it bothered him, honestly, since he had more experience than Jazz had in ignoring the pull of a bond, but Jazz had been insistent on keeping it shut. Thundercracker knew it would have been distracting for the mech.

::I'm good.:: Jazz replied, though he sounded harried. ::TC, we should stick t'gether. Prowl said we might be targets, earlier.::

::What?:: Thundercracker asked, startled. Surely everyone on the field was a target, but...

Jazz cursed. ::I shouldn't be tellin' ya, it's classified from Starscream's stolen intel, but let's not risk it. Prowl had Soundwave leak th' fact some of us time travelers are gonna be here in Germany. With the Seekers comin' in—I think he's comin' t' find us—I can be at your position in twenty—twenty-five minutes.::

Thundercracker didn't understand the rush, but he trusted Jazz's judgment. ::Who's coming? Should I open the bond—?::
His question hit static when the comm. lines went down again. Thundercracker hissed in irritation. Whatever the drones were up to, they were succeeding at blocking a wide range of frequencies. They had no contact overseas except in sparse pockets. He gazed upwards in frustration, wondering how close the interference was if it was breaking into their personal comms.

And then—

Thundercracker stopped as the air shifted and was expelled by the arrival of a teleporter. He turned to face the intruding mech properly, ready to fight the Seeker, because he couldn't imagine Galvatron wasting that kind of technology on any other mech—

But it wasn't a Seeker.

All around them, the battle raged on in the night, but on that tiny side street of broken window shops and smoldering cars, Thundercracker stared up at his opponent in stunned, horrified silence.

Armor crackling and alight with orange-red flames, a leviathan of a mech stood upright, his outstretched arm holding up a spear of similar metal and ignited surface. Thundercracker felt everything stop as the mech's golden optics roved and then found him, standing frozen with fear.

The Fallen had arrived.

End Chapter 45.

Chapter End Notes

A conclusion awaits us. It's not the one we wanted exactly, but it's the one we need.

A/Ns:
- Anti-satellite weapons (ASAT) are designed to incapacitate or destroy satellites for strategic military purposes. (From Wikipedia.)
- Joint Region Marianas – the United States base in Guam, in the Pacific Ocean.
- Ultra Magnus and Keller are going to be drinking buddies.
- Also, Soundwave and Skyfire are probably my favorite secondary characters in this entire series. So. Much. Angst.
- No, Bluestreak is not about to become Bee 2.0 with the voice issue. He has a mech-version of a concussion.
- "Legion drones" – refers to the biblical quote, "We are Legion: for we are many." Thanks R3aper, for that idea!
- Say it all together with Rachel now: "Oh, it's that Fallen Fucker."
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Keller pulls out the big guns and then Thundercracker discovers the answer to a question that has haunted them all (and you, the readers) since the war first happened fifty years ago in another world: "Why did this happen?"

:) Enjoy. (Thank you, Shantastic!)

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wiesbaden, Germany
8:30 PM

Thundercracker knew he was going to die the exact moment he realized just who he was standing there staring at, all by himself in a dingy little alley.

He had never seen a mech alive that looked like the Fallen. Fire seemed to be sprouting from under the armor or maybe from the top of it; whatever the source, the Fallen clearly didn't care about the fire… or he wanted it there. Thundercracker might have thought the flames were part of an elaborate hologram, a ruse to terrify his enemies, but he could see the flames licking at the stone beneath his armored pedes; the concrete was melting under the intense heat.

The mech had orange armor that blended with the flames. It was flawless, but of a very old design. Thundercracker had never seen a mech like this, not even during his life as a civilian before the war began. The Fallen carried only one exterior weapon, a spear as tall as he was. The blade on the end seemed perfectly intact, despite the flames that also covered it. Thundercracker kept his optics on the spear, which seemed to loom overhead like a beacon of death.

"Fallen," he managed to say, addressing his nemesis. For the life of him, Thundercracker just wanted to get the hell out of there. He didn't know if he could outpace the teleporting mech. He had never been able to escape Skywarp.

The Fallen, with his deep golden optics, stared back at Thundercracker, unimpressed. "Decepticon," he stated. He lifted his spear at the other mech. "Do you stand ready to die?"

Thundercracker stepped backwards, spark shrieking in fear. Every instinct told him to flee. There was no way—no way—that he could win against the Fallen in a fight. He had to get back to the others, to Jazz, and get backup. At least they knew their main enemy was there. They just had to regroup—

Slowly, even as the sound of the fight against the drones screamed on from miles behind him, Thundercracker made plans to back down the short alley to the more open avenue behind him, and
then launch himself into the air. He had to take the chance – there was no other option. The Fallen watched him carefully and stepped slowly to the side, lowering his spear to spark level. Thundercracker took that as a sign to start moving as well, but—

Then, out of nowhere, the Fallen stopped moving, straightening out of the attack position he had assumed. He simply stood there and stared at Thundercracker. If the Seeker's optics hadn't failed and the flames weren't tricking him...

The Fallen almost seemed... amused.

"You are from the future, are you not?" the creature asked, startling Thundercracker.

Weapons still powering up, Thundercracker watched as the Fallen moved closer. It wasn't necessarily a threatening gesture, but he felt that everything about this mech was a threat. "What?" he demanded.

"Galvatron spoke of finding one of your ensemble," the Fallen replied, utterly calm. His voice was... was... flat. It was spoken in Cybertronian, but a very old form of the language, using glyphs that had to be translated by a subroutine Thundercracker hadn't used in vorn. "He said there were ten Neutrals. The other Decepticon you just killed sent a transmission that said you were here, and of course, your optics betray your lack of allegiance."

"And if I am?" Thundercracker asked, optics continually moving to the Fallen's spear. The flaming giant held it loosely in his grip, not tense in the least.

The Fallen tilted his head just slightly. "There will be no failure here," he said, blunt. "Do not think you can avert Earth's destiny twice."

It took Thundercracker a moment to realize what the other mech had just said. "Avert?" he repeated. Despite his anxiety, Thundercracker laughed darkly. "Don't worry. You didn't fail in our world. You got exactly what you wanted."

Earth's destruction, the loss of nearly the entire Cybertronian and human races, the deaths of almost everyone Thundercracker and his friends cared about—of course the Fallen had gotten what he wanted. How could that have been a failure—?

"Of course I failed," the Fallen said, for the first time giving off some emotion. It almost seemed like surprise, though Thundercracker knew it was condescending in nature. "Or else you would not be here now, Decepticon."

Shocked, Thundercracker stopped watching his enemy for an attack. Instead, the Seeker struggled to comprehend what he had just heard.

"...What?" he managed to ask.

That—that made no sense.

The Fallen just stared back, apparently not caring about Thundercracker's confusion. He did thankfully keep talking and didn't attack. "This world is to become one of many stepping stones toward our universe's greatest destiny," he said, bluntly. He sounded so calm. "The resources here will power my task to bring our Lord to greatness once more."

Thundercracker stared harder. "What are you talking about?" he demanded, processors suddenly reeling. Wait. Wait one second—
"Unicron," the Fallen replied mercilessly. He had the gall to smile, just slightly, as he gazed down at the slightly smaller Seeker. "The Unmaker. He calls for his release from the Pit, and I will answer."

Closer than before, an explosion shook the windows of a small store just behind Thundercracker, but the Seeker didn’t care. He didn’t care about the war, or the fighting, or anything. He stared up at their greatest enemy and couldn't fathom what he had just heard. He didn't want to.

It scared the shit out of him.

Moving to the side slightly, the Fallen kept his judging stare on Thundercracker; it was as if he had just found a fascinating specimen. "I will stop at nothing to achieve this," he explained. He even sounded a little proud. "I will not let this Earth escape, although I can see why I might have given up on yours. Such a failed experiment."

"…But…" Thundercracker felt his limbs start to quake. That… wasn't true. It couldn't be. This wasn't a fairy tale. This was real—this wasn't some religious story—

"Your world, from Galvatron's description, was a brilliant example of how you mortal minds fumble the simplest of goals," the Fallen continued. "Your Galvatron succumbed to madness, as many mortal creatures do, from the power I granted him."

Moving slowly, the Fallen finally stopped at an angle, tilting his head ever so slightly as he stared back at Thundercracker. He probably was relishing the moment, thrilling in the fact that the Seeker was watching him with increasing fear and horror.

"If he had not failed, I would not have either," the Fallen said, smiling again. "I need your kin, the Cybertronians, to properly mine this planet for the energy. A wasted effort, in the end, if all of you were killed." He stood up straight. "That will not happen this time. I will make sure of it."

"But the drones… never left. They were still there," Thundercracker managed to say. He thought he was going crazy. This had to be a lie. Because… because… it didn't make sense.

It wasn't fair.

"Yes." The Fallen made a disapproving sound. "That is what happens when I give great power to mortal kind. Galvatron, in his madness, set the drones to destroy the one race I did need left standing." The giant mech's optics narrowed just slightly through the flames that danced upon his faceplates. "I would see no reason to get involved after that point. Without the Cybertronians to mine it, Earth would be of no more use to me, or my Lord."

Thundercracker knew he should have taken the chance to escape while the Fallen was monologuing. There was no way he could win a battle one-on-one with this monster. The ground itself was melting as the Fallen walked on it. Thundercracker could feel the waves of heat hitting him from where he stood, and he saw the brick of the storefront behind the Fallen start to lose form as it liquefied from the flames.

But Thundercracker wasn't running. He couldn't run away now, not without knowing why all of this had happened, and there would never be another chance to get an answer. He was determined to keep standing there, to keep the Fallen talking. His spark, despite the terror flooding through it, demanded an answer, no matter what it did to haunt him later.

"…Why did you abandon it?" he finally asked, forcing his vocalizer to work. It took everything he had to keep standing.

The Fallen paused. "What?" he asked.
"Y-you could have used the humans. Or stopped the drones," Thundercracker asked. He wondered if he sounded hysterical. Next to the stoic mech there, he probably did look it. "Why not—why not just stop the drones and fix your plan?"

It didn't make any sense. Why? Why would the Fallen just leave them like that? Why—why did this happen?!

"Why bother to make the effort? It was a waste of time," the Fallen cut in, speaking over his panicked thoughts. If he were a lesser mech, he probably would have shrugged. He clearly wasn't interested in giving an answer that would be less painful. "There are other planets, other species. Earth is nothing. It would have provided another step toward salvation, but there are many other steps I can use. I desire haste above all else."

Another step.

Something deep within Thundercracker's processors stumbled over that statement.

"You did this to Earth… to us…" Thundercracker began, his vocalizer warbling with suppressed emotion, "for nothing?"

The Fallen stood taller. "For the glory of Unicron," he said, his own voice unnaturally loud and hollow.

No. No. Thundercracker stared.

The Fallen had come to their Earth to turn the planet into a power cell, devising his drones to wipe out the organic life forms and provide an empty world for his slaves to harness. But his plan had foundered on the insanity of his chosen agent, and the drones had failed. They had killed off the slaves as well as the native organics, leaving no one to use to mine the energy. So the Fallen had moved on, to enslave another planet, leaving the drones behind like some sick, abandoned cleanup crew.

The Fallen had left them… to die.

For no reason.

Every moment of agony, every death suffered, the lives of their four human children ruined, their homes destroyed, every sleepless moment of fear they were forced to endure—

Had been

For

Nothing.

Thundercracker stared and stared, but the image of the Fallen standing there so boldly and so fearlessly in front of him never left.

The rage building inside his spark like an inferno never left either. It grew. It grew.

"Do you stand ready to die?" the Fallen asked again, lifting his spear.

Thundercracker bared his denta and clenched both fists slowly.

"No," he said, meaning it.
And then he attacked the enflamed mech with everything he had left.

Earth Stratosphere
Approximately 2:20 PM EST

Something was wrong and it wasn't the fact that communication was going haywire, or even the fact that they had just been forced to drop to less than 50 miles above the Earth, following the Nemesis as she descended, threatening to land. They had just gotten the news of Galvatron's demise from the Earth bound team working with Prime. Ultra Magnus did not allow himself or his crew the time to celebrate. They had more important things to handle, such as Nemesis.

The Hyperion was not an Alpha-Class starship like Nemesis was, but they could hold their own. It was the Seekers that truly unnerved Ultra Magnus and his tactical team. They were too quick for many of their defensive weapons and were keen on taking out the Hyperion's forward facing weapons. The offensive they had launched a little over 8 breems ago had quickly turned into a brawl in free-fall above Earth, which loomed below like an expansive ocean of white and blue. Less than ten cycles ago their enemies had started a rapid descent towards the planet's surface. Although Nemesis was too large to land, she could drop troops and transports more effectively from a lower altitude.

Somewhere down there, he realized as he traveled from the strategy station back to the main command center, Prime fought. The humans were fighting for their own survival. The Fallen, wherever he was and whatever he was, also lurked there with their newest foes, the drones.

Prime had given the Hyperion the task of handling Nemesis alone while Earth battled their planet-based foes. Ultra Magnus had not failed his Prime yet in the long course of the war, and he was not going to start now.

However, as he approached the center podium in the command deck, Ultra Magnus was displeased to see that the main hull HUD was offline, taken down by skillful shots from the Seekers. Their troubles didn't end there, but they came from a place Ultra Magnus had not expected.

"The humans are hailing us," Blaster announced from the Communications deck. "They are instructing us to maintain or increase our current distance, two hundred hics from Nemesis."

"That is ill-advised," Red Alert said from his seat at Ultra Magnus' side, running several security protocols as the Hyperion rocked from more incoming shots. "While the Nemesis can continue to barrage us from this distance, our maximum counterattack strength will only be accessible if we continue closer. The flight enabled mechs can only go so far from Hyperion's cover."

"Why did they ask us to pull back?" Ultra Magnus asked instead, looking to Blaster.

The Communications Officer listened to whatever the humans were saying to him over the encrypted line. "They're firing their own counter assault," he said. His voice took on a surprised lilt. "They claim that their targeting systems may miscalculate and catch the Hyperion in the crossfire if we move too close."

"They have a counterassault weapon?" Red Alert asked, optics narrowing. He sounded incredulous.

Ultra Magnus also felt uncertain over this turn of events. The humans had made no mention of having anything more than their fliers, who were already firing as best they could at the Seekers. They had helped as a distraction, significantly, and that had enabled the Hyperion to move closer to
bring the assault to *Nemesis* directly.

Why back off now? Something was wrong about the situation. Ultra Magnus had been warned by Prowl that the humans liked to keep their military intelligence under wraps, secret even from their own allies, but surely if they had some sort of high powered weapon that could have attacked *Nemesis*, they would have mentioned it, at least to Prowl.

"...The human fliers have retreated," Moonracer said abruptly from below them. She spoke uncertainly. Ultra Magnus immediately walked over to the main level of the bridge, spark coiling with his own discomfort.

Suddenly, this was not a matter of trying to figure out what their allies were doing.

"Call for all fliers and fighters to return to the ship," he ordered to Blaster, who shot the orders out without hesitation. He felt Red Alert walk up behind him, his disapproval palpable, but Ultra Magnus then turned to Moonracer. "I want a full visual feed on what's going on out there."

"Hull cameras are still malfunctioning, but I can piece in visual feed from Powerglide. He's taken position on the forward bow," the femme replied. She quickly inputted the commands into her station. "Feed will be up in one cycle, sir. Secondary monitors show the reported locations for all off-ship combatants."

Ultra Magnus moved to the edge of the platform and rested his hands on the railing to gaze up at the screen. It took more than a cycle, but the center screen did flicker to life as *Hyperion* rocked with the force of another hit from *Nemesis*. He heard his bridge crew giving damage reports as the silent battle appeared; the wreckage of mechs and ordnance from both sides plagued the view. The number of small explosions were fewer since they had drawn their own soldiers back, but—

There was a flash. It was not from either ship, and Ultra Magnus was granted one docile look of the Earth before he realized that the flash had come from the watery world itself.

A brilliant pillar of light shot up like a spear from the planet. It shone like plasma, but the height and the speed was nothing like the weapons they had been told Earth possessed. The humans hadn't even mastered interstellar space travel—but this—

*Nemesis* was close enough to fire upon, so the entirety of the *Hyperion* rumbled as the electromagnetic backlash from the beam hit them. They got off lucky, Ultra Magnus knew in hindsight; *Nemesis*' fate was revealed in the split second it took for the light to vanish into the void, leaving behind a devastating picture.

In that single instance, the hull of the *Nemesis* had been sliced through like a plasma knife through a steel beam. Mechs, debris and short-lived fire bled out into the planet's stratosphere. The air inside the vessel was enough that the fireball blew out like a fierce cloud. Ultra Magnus stared in astonishment and realized what none of them had ever suspected.

"The humans," Red Alert said, staring at the screen with moderate surprise. Everyone on the bridge was speechless.

Ultra Magnus watched as remnants of the severed part of the Decepticon ship tore away, mingling with the bits of unlucky Seekers who had not managed to move in time. Whatever the humans had used was powerful. He doubted, from the fact they had chosen to fire it now, that it could be used without time to recharge; it was possible that it was a single use weapon and could never fire again, but it had done its job.
"Prowl was right," he murmured, optics narrowing as he watched their enemies scramble. Humanity was not to be trifled with.

"Sir?"

"All forward teams, go," he ordered, voice loud enough to reach across the command center. Blaster gave the command while the mechs on the command deck rushed to track them, saving their awe for another time and place. "While their defenses are down, we must make this count."

_Nemesis_ was no longer functional. The Seekers were scrambling; they could tell that much from a distance. Ultra Magnus saw this as their chance to move and hit hard. They could not allow their enemy to regroup. Galvatron had fallen, but the remaining Decepticon soldiers could not be allowed to flee without capture or persecution.

This would end _today_.

"Are the communications lines still up?" he asked, rounding on Blaster.

His Communications Officer shook his helm. "Negative. The electromagnetic interference from the blast is blocking the channels for now. I can have them up in just a moment, sir."

Ultra Magnus nodded. "When they are, tell Director Keller _well done._" He smirked as he strode past the desk, ignoring Blaster's surprised expression. "And _thank you_ for missing my ship."

He nodded to Red Alert on his way to the grav-lift as he sent the ship-wide code that signaled the change of command while he was off ship. Their enemies were on the run, their ship irreparably damaged. This was the moment to strike with everything they had. The humans would take care of the Decepticons that entered the atmosphere, but the _Hyperion_ and Ultra Magnus' team would handle those that dared to continue the fight.

This would end now, he told himself again as he prepared to enter the fray of taking back Earth's atmosphere. They would _win_.

---

_Wiesbaden, Germany_

8:40 PM

_Do not stop. Do not stop. If you stop and it catches you, you will die._

Thundercracker had no intention of dying, no matter how dangerous the situation he was in. He had made the first move by firing and trying to hit a more vulnerable place on the Fallen's armor. The Fallen had been surprised, if only temporarily, by the attack, clearly not having expected the Seeker to be so bold.

But surprise and Thundercracker's weapons meant very little in the grand scheme of things, as the Seeker learned all too quickly.

The Fallen had no weak or vulnerable places in his armor. There were no blind spots or thinned plating to take advantage of. Thundercracker now had no illusions over how the Fallen had lasted so long. He was beyond ancient but he was built to last.

So after wasting several rounds of plasma and stumbling coldly over this realization, Thundercracker found himself dodging a counterassault he had no way of truly out-running, not for long.
The spear must have weighed an incredible amount, but the Fallen had no problem swinging it toward the jet faster than Thundercracker could hope to move. The only thing that saved him from the first swing was the fact Thundercracker already had his cannon pointed in the direction of the swinging blade. The blast redirected the flaming metal, but only just. Thundercracker ducked as the Fallen swung again, this time almost colliding directly with his helm.

This would not do.

Forcing the fear out of his spark, Thundercracker focused on surviving. If he got back to his teammates, perhaps they could find a way to attack together and weaken the creature. It was the only solution he could think of. The trick would be to get away—

The Fallen never spoke or made any sound of effort as he worked Thundercracker back further and further, the Seeker never able to outpace the larger mech quickly enough to fully escape the swinging blade.

The crumbling cement beneath him gave way at just the wrong moment. Thundercracker ignited his turbines just as the Fallen lunged. For a moment, he thought he had cleared the attack, but almost without warning, Thundercracker felt immense pain light up his leg's sensor relays. Offending metal sliced into his armor as if it were merely air, severing two major energon lines and one of the main power lines to his right turbine.

With one turbine useless, Thundercracker spiraled back down to the street, slamming straight into a car. His left wing almost didn't retract in time and he could feel glass cut into the back of his exposed joints. A piece of ragged metal sliced into the back of his neck and he felt energon pool back up his throat; more energon lines had been cut. No time, no time—

Thundercracker slid down off the car, trying to get his bearings. His optics found his opponent calmly making his way back over toward the fallen jet. Thundercracker snarled and fired at the Fallen as the large mech got closer. The shots did nothing, even when he was hit straight in the chestplates. Hydraulics whining in protest, Thundercracker found the strength to ignore the pain in his leg and shot to his feet.

There was no way to run away from this.

He had to find a way to actually damage his foe. The only fragging thing that might actually damage the armor was something made of the same substance, Thundercracker realized. That spear… that spear would be able to damage him.

But there was no way to get the spear, let alone use it. The Fallen never let it go for a second and Thundercracker didn't doubt his grip. More than that, Thundercracker could see how the flames lapped at ordinary stone, causing it to melt away as if made of ice. There was no way Thundercracker's armor could handle that sort of intensity. It was a supernatural fire—something evil.

He watched as the Fallen circled again. He wasn't trying to drag the fight out, but Thundercracker could tell the orange mech was having fun, or he would have been, had he been sane or mortal. Energon burned at his denta and he spit it out.

Hyperaware of the spear pointed his way, Thundercracker tried to distract his enemy long enough to figure things out. He could not die before getting what he had heard back to Jazz.

He thought about activating the bond, but squashed the thought. Too dangerous. Not yet. Only if he couldn't escape.
"What are you?" he demanded, stumbling on his unsteady limbs. The hydraulics in his right leg screeched in protest. He couldn't take another hit like that. It would paralyze him most likely.

"I am the Unmaker's right hand," the Fallen replied, stalking his prey with his harsh optics blaring through the fire. He adjusted his grip on his weapon effortlessly. "I have been since his banishment and I will not cease to be until my task is completed."

At first, Thundercracker wasn't sure what to make of that, other than to label the Fallen for the religious nutjob that he was.

But something… something within that statement caught his attention.

Something both terrifying and awe-inspiring.

"…You are one of the first mechs," Thundercracker said, dropping his guard involuntarily as he gazed up at the other mech. "One of the first Primus made."

The legends spoke of the Beginning—when Primus and Unicron fought—and how Primus made the First Mechs, the Thirteen Primes. They helped him to defeat the evil that was Unicron. But that would mean the Fallen was older than Vector Sigma, older than the entire Cybertronian and human race combined…!

By the All Spark…

However, the Fallen seemed to grow agitated by Thundercracker's statement. "Primus had nothing to do with me," the primordial creature spat. "I was devised by Unicron. I am the perfect creature your Primus was incapable of making."

There was no telling what that meant. Thundercracker couldn't even begin to fathom it all. He didn't want… this. He didn't want to believe that Unicron was real, or still out there. He didn't even want to hear about Primus or the first Thirteen. They were safer as stories. They weren't nightmares that way.

But what he didn't have the option of disbelieving was the fact that the Fallen was here—and he had every intention of killing Thundercracker and everyone else the Seeker had come to deem worth protecting.

He could not let that happen. Not… again.

It did not matter, then, where the Fallen had come from. Thundercracker found himself edging back further as the Fallen stalked more to the side. They moved in silence now and Thundercracker could hear the far off explosions growing nearer and then farther away. The battle didn't matter anymore.

Because…

Thundercracker stared at the Fallen, and then his optics dropped to his spear.

The Fallen took a step closer and against his better judgment, Thundercracker stayed where he was.

Because somewhere in his processors, something… clicked.

Thundercracker opened the bond link. He felt Jazz somewhere near, but in the chaos of battle, it was difficult to tell where anything was.

He was just an old, old mech. Thundercracker dodged as the Fallen lashed out again with the spear. The hot, flaming metal cut through the stone beneath him like it was parting water. For a brief
moment, Thundercracker was enraptured by the sight of the metal weapon. It was old, as old as the mech holding it.

_Mech._

Thundercracker rolled to the side, his tucked-in wings scraping the cement harshly. He saw the Fallen approach him in silence, the spear in his hand roaring even in the light rain. It was an eerie, unnatural sight.

But suddenly, Thundercracker did not feel as helpless as he had earlier.

Grunting, he slid down the gravelly remains of the wall he had landed on and tried to slow the energon loss in his leg and throat. The Fallen kept walking closer, getting larger and more terrifying with every step, until he loomed overhead, giving the felled Seeker a quiet look. There was no emotion to him. It had been weeded out through madness and time.

Looking upwards, Thundercracker just stared.

He was just a mech.

Thundercracker grinned through the energon now pooling from his throat.

"What is so amusing, Decepticon?" the Fallen asked, spear raised. "Has acceptance of your fate finally found you?"

Arms spread and chest wide open for attack, Thundercracker just leaned further back and smiled.

_JUST A MECH._

The Fallen stared at him, yellow optics narrowing just slightly through the flames, as if wondering if he had missed something about Thundercracker. The Seeker wondered if the creature could read his mind. He hoped not. Because he was counting on someone else doing it instead.

Someone who would hear Thundercracker's thought and realize a fundamental truth: a mech was a mech… and a spark was a spark.

"Enjoy the Pit," Thundercracker announced, optics growing wider, taking in the Fallen's sneer—

Just as Jazz appeared in the air behind him, jumping off the roof of the smoldering hospice, magnets whirling at full power. Thundercracker could feel every emotion pulsing from his spark and knew Jazz could feel his… as well as that one sentence that mattered most: the Fallen was just another mech, made of metal, energon… and a completely breakable spark.

It was all the information he needed.

Jazz landed hard on top of the Fallen's back. The flames flared up like a wall of the giant's anger. The Fallen snarled and whirled around. Jazz had already kicked straight off, flames following him like a wave of water, and landed just yards to the side of their enemy, yanking with all of his strength with the magnets embedded in his clawed hands. The Fallen didn't have the time to turn and attack the new mech. Jazz threw his hands upwards, catching their locked quarry perfectly.

Thundercracker saw a flicker of recognition in the Fallen's optics as he turned to see his new opponent, but it was too late. It was too late to hide the second fundamental truth Thundercracker had figured out earlier:
Only the Fallen's spear could ever hope to pierce his impenetrable armor.

Thundercracker ducked out of the way as Jazz threw the flaming spear, accelerating it with his magnets. The spear flew true, the tip slicing straight through the spark chamber, the pulsating, red-hot metal weapon following the arc of Jazz's magnetic stream. Rolling as best he could, Thundercracker jerked back and stared straight upwards as the Fallen was impaled straight through. His dark mouth opened in shock, not pain. That creature would never know pain.

But he had a spark, one that could be extinguished. All mechs died, Thundercracker realized.

All mechs die, Jazz echoed back over their bond, the connection that had ended up saving them.

Thundercracker grinned through his bleeding mouth.

The Fallen reached up with jerky movements to grab the end of the spear. Thundercracker watched and waited, as the optics flickered and the motions slowed.

The orange hand came to a rest at the spot where the shaft embedded itself in his spark chamber—and then it stopped. Thundercracker stared as the yellow optics flickered and then ceased glowing, turning a familiar gray. Joints creaking, the Fallen collapsed onto his knees then fell sideways, causing the ground to quake.

"Please work," Jazz begged, voice breaking. "Please, please let that intel be right. Please…"

All around them, Thundercracker heard a cacophony of screaming. It sounded like people at first, but then it grew louder and the frequency spectrum widened. He could feel it in his armor, echoing and wailing—the death of the drones.

The sky was bleeding. The ground felt like Earth had rolled off its axis. Everything seemed to fall apart, though Thundercracker was mostly certain it was within his own mind. He looked up over the small street, spark shuddering. He saw a cloud of drones drop out of the air like stones just beyond their position. The screaming continued. It went on and on, until finally, the world went mute.

There was nothing. No more screams, no more firing. Just silence. Thundercracker stared up at the sky and shivered.

He saw Jazz on the other side of the body, barely standing. He was no longer on fire; neither was the Fallen. Jazz's frontal armor and windshield were severely melted from the intense heat, but the mech was alright, physically at least. Jazz's visor was wide, bright, piercing the air, straight through Thundercracker.

Slowly, Thundercracker managed to climb to his pedes and stumble across the road. He avoided the Fallen as best he could; the presence of the mech was still too real.

Jazz stared at the body for a moment, but when Thundercracker approached he turned to look up at the Seeker. They didn't speak at first. Thundercracker stared down at the Autobot. The silence… was a void.

"He's dead," Jazz suddenly said, breaking it. Further away, Thundercracker thought he heard the sound of humans shouting. That was it though. Nothing else.

Thundercracker nodded. "Yeah."

The silver mech before him shuddered, once. "...He's dead," Jazz said again. He paused and looked up again, visor even wider than before. "TC…"
Lifting a dark hand, Thundercracker touched Jazz's shoulder. "It's over," he said, though he wasn't sure if he was trying to reassure Jazz alone.

Jazz just looked at him and gave him a fragile smile.

"Yeah. Yeah, it is."

Thundercracker didn't know which one of them it was who clung to the other first. He didn't care, nor did it matter. They stood there, embracing, in awe of being alive. For the first time in over fifty years, Thundercracker looked out at their world and saw death finally leaving instead of lingering to haunt them.

It was over.

End Chapter 46.

Chapter End Notes

A/Ns:
-The stratosphere is the section of Earth's atmosphere just above the section where planes fly (6-30 miles in altitude), which is under the section with satellites, or exosphere, where most satellites orbit. Most communications and weather satellites hold a geostationary orbit with an altitude of approximately 35700km (22000 miles).
-A breem is 8.3 minutes, a cycle is about 1 minute. A klik is still a kilometer.
-Ding dong the witch is dead. Whoo! You have no idea how incredibly satisfying it was to finally write this. :)  
-The bonding thing was important pretty much only because of this. Oops.
-Jazz explains in the next chapter, for further clarification on his special mission.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

The battle is over and the survivors catch their breath. THanks, shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the Atlantic Ocean

The battle for China had ended before Jazz and Thundercracker made it back to Wiesbaden Army Airfield. In fact, they were still sitting on the side of the road waiting for transportation when the drone-induced static had finally faded from the atmosphere and Ironhide spent several minutes on the comm. expressing his sore disappointment that he'd missed the gestalt battle in Afghanistan. That was the first time Jazz had heard that combiner teams had landed, but he was glad to hear that "the situation was contained" almost everywhere. He hadn't had any direct communication with combatants in South America or Afghanistan yet, but the events of the past day had left him with a positive attitude.

He was content with the thought that he and his mate were walking (limping) away from the most deadly battle of their lives, alive and together. They were leaving the piles and piles of dead drones that littered the German countryside, traveling back to WAAF to catch a flight stateside. Prowl wanted their help tracking down the fleeing Decepticon air force; the Seekers had beaten a hasty retreat once word of Galvatron and the Fallen's mutual deaths had spread.

When they reached the airfield Jazz found Lennox giving orders from a gurney. He had taken shrapnel to the leg, so he was temporarily grounded, but he had commandeered a couple of orderlies from Major Young, and was using them to arrange transportation and housing for his teams in Europe. He was insistent that Jazz and Thundercracker get stateside to see to their family. Barns was alright, and had gratefully gone ahead; he had also been anxious to get home to make sure the loved ones they had left at Plumas were alright.

Thundercracker had been injured severely enough that he and Jazz had been obliged to simply sit in the middle of Wiesbaden and wait for Hoist to come and make repairs, especially to his legs and neck. Given the fact that he'd faced off against the Fallen alone, he was lucky to be alive; once he had realized what was going on, Jazz had been terrified he wouldn't get to him in time. The bond had made it better, and worse; the fear had been nearly paralyzing, but the connection had ultimately saved their lives and the lives of everyone else too. Thundercracker had kept his wits about him, warning Jazz about the presence of the Fallen and giving him the idea that the mech could be killed by using his own weapon. That had made Jazz's apparently self-imposed mission—to somehow find a way to kill the Fallen—that much easier.

"Have I ever told you I loved you?" Jazz asked conversationally as they walked—or in Thundercracker's case limped, hobbled and stumbled—across the tarmac.
As he dragged himself along, it was clear that Thundercracker was too tired to joke and too tired to snap back at him. Jazz could feel a different sort of irritation pricking from Thundercracker's exhausted spark, and knew the questions were coming. He was glad they at least made it to the plane and had a chance to sit down before hashing this out.

There was no way Thundercracker could fly back on his own, so Lennox had arranged for them both to ride on one of the NEST planes. Fitting him into the cargo hold would have been hilarious if it wasn't so clearly painful for the Seeker. Without the aid of transformation, it would have been impossible, but after a lot of rearranging of the contents of the plane, they somehow managed to fit the giant blue Seeker into a C-5M carrier.

Jazz was too tired to laugh at the scene, but some of the humans did look curious about why he was giggling over nothing while squeezing in beside his bondmate. He thought they'd forgive him; everyone had the right to be a little gleeful in the aftermath of their victory.

It was only after Thundercracker had rolled up as far as he could into the aircraft and it had taken off that the two of them were able to talk. Jazz knew the jet had plenty of questions. Even if he was exhausted, Jazz would make the effort to answer him.

"You knew," Thundercracker began, "that by killing the Fallen, we'd kill all the drones."

He didn't sound accusatory, or angry. If anything, there was faint disbelief ringing in his voice. Jazz grinned and sat down next to the transformed jet.

"Starscream's intel gave us that much," he explained with a shrug. "Somethin' in it mentioned how the drones rely, relied, on residual spark power from th' Fallen 'imself. Like a big echoin' chain. That's how he controlled 'em from a distance. All through feelings, I guess. Sorta like a bond."

That made sense, since the drones seemed to have a hive mind. Kill one of them, another knew it, felt it, acted to replace it. But nothing could replace the queen of the hive. There was never a "queen" drone. Just… the Fallen.

"Whatever it was, we reasoned that if we could take out th' big guy, the little guys just wouldn't work no more," he told Thundercracker out loud. "One big hive mind without its leader. Either they'd keel over all t'gether, or they wouldn't be able t' work. Either way it worked fer us."

Thundercracker rumbled lowly. "What else did you know?" he asked, now a little bit defensive, possibly upset at being kept out of the loop.

There were a lot of things Jazz would know and act on that Thundercracker and the rest of their family would never be allowed to know. It was part of the job. But some things, he reasoned, everybody deserved to know. Especially Thundercracker.

"Prowl told Skyfire t' tell Soundwave that some of us were gonna be in Germany." Jazz laughed weakly. "Soundwave apparently fed Galvatron some bullshit about how we were all gonna be there…"

"How did you know that the Fallen was going to hunt us down?" Thundercracker asked quickly.

Jazz remembered that day (was it only a few days ago? Really?) when Prowl had turned to him for assistance. Because he knew Jazz would always be willing to take on a mission like this when it mattered most. Prowl knew him, knew that no matter what world he hailed from, Jazz would take the risk to win.

"Well… we didn't. But it was a good guess," Jazz offered. He chuckled at Thundercracker's low
grumble and patted his side before continuing. "With that new bit of info about how the Fallen attacked Perceptor's crew on the Galaxus, Prowl figured that the Fallen was gonna be lookin' into whatever else was usin' his gamma ray tricks. One o' th' last messages Galvatron sent to th' Fallen that Starscream had downloaded was about Vortex' story." His smile grew strained. "Good fragging luck on our part this worked."

Luck, luck, luck. It was almost terribly unfair how it had worked for them, after all that planning. He couldn't complain about the outcome, though.

"Indeed," Thundercracker said. His tail fins went down slightly. "So besides making us bait… he entrusted you to figure out how to kill the Fallen if he showed up?"

Jazz paused and then nodded. "Yup."

The jet was probably sending him a long look of astonishment. The wave of emotion that Jazz felt over the bond confirmed it. "…That's insane," he accused.

"Hey, it worked." Jazz grinned and rested his helm against the jet's side. "I'm an insane, lucky son of o' bitch, what can I say? The Autobots know how t' pick 'em."

Thundercracker rumbled darkly. "You're definitely crazy." The rush of affection, exasperation and relief that accompanied his statement made Jazz smile through his own exhaustion.

He wanted to offline right there in the safety of closeness with his mate, with the battle rush long gone from his systems. Instead of sleeping, he called a new number he had picked up only a few days previous. It was on his speed dial, of course, and now always would be.

Rachel picked up after a handful of seconds. Jazz tried to picture her fumbling with the controls in the back of another plane, or perhaps even Vortex. He liked that image. It meant she was still alive and well enough to answer him.

::Hey, Rach.:: he said.

There was a pause. "Hey," she replied.

Jazz shuttered his visor and reveled in the sound of her voice. ::How you doin', baby girl?:: he asked. His whole frame was shaking, though he knew it was simply from exertion.

"Fine. Vortex is fine, too. Blue's gonna need Ratchet's tender loving care, but he's not critical or anything." Rachel was quiet for a moment. "You? TC?"

::We're good.:: Jazz let his helm rest on Thundercracker's shoulder plating, mindful of the damages there. The jet was practically in recharge.

Rachel started to speak, but stopped. Jazz gave her time, curling up more.

"I'm glad," Rachel said, voice breaking.

Jazz smiled.

::Me, too, Rach.::

"When are you coming home?" Rachel asked, trying to sound stronger than she was feeling.

Home. Home. Jazz hid a laugh. ::Me an' TC are on the flight over. Barns should be ahead by an hour or two.::
"We're almost to California. We had to help with the drones, but we have to get back because Bluestreak was injured."

Worry fought the tiredness. ::How bad?::

"He's fine," Rachel replied. "Just knocked in the head."

::Good. Ratchet'll fix him once they get back from China. I heard they made out good there.:: Jazz said. He imagined seeing their group back together, all safe. ::Any word from the others?::

"Everyone's alive. Don't know in what shape, but Prowl forwarded to our team that everyone's okay." Rachel sniffed. "We're okay."

Jazz curled up as far as he could against Thundercracker.

::We're okay,: he echoed in promise.

For the first time, it was a promise he felt vaguely certain he could keep.

0000

*Dover Air Force Base*

*Dover, Delaware, United States*

Her body ached. Her head was pounding. She felt like she could sleep for days on end. Somehow though, Kass managed to get off the plane she had flown on from Afghanistan and stumble in the direction the soldiers directed her. She had spent most of the return flight patching up Hot Rod, who had lost his entire left leg, but after sealing any leaks, he was stuck that way until Ratchet could look at him.

They were refueling on the East Coast before taking another four-hour journey back to California. Kass wondered if she could find somewhere to take a nap on the plane; she was almost in a daze when she looked out at the air base. So many soldiers. The noise was only a murmur, thankfully.

Before she had the chance to ask for water, or somewhere to sit, her daze was evaporated when she heard someone call her name. Kass turned and gasped when she saw Barns running across part of the airfield in worn army fatigues, but thankfully very much alive and well.

"Barns!" she exclaimed, astonished. She rushed forward and held her arms out. Oh—he was okay!

Barns accepted the hug warmly. "You are okay?" he asked, moving back to look her over. He looked concerned. "You have burns…"

Kass couldn't help but laugh, a little hysterically. "Not a scratch on me otherwise. You?" she asked. He seemed okay, other than a few scratches and bags under his eyes. She glanced behind him at the plane he had arrived on. "Where are Jazz and TC?"

"They were on another flight. They're fine." Barns paused and took a breath. He shook his head a little. "Jazz killed the Fallen."

All at once, her relief over her friends being alright was replaced with shock.

She… didn't even know what to say.

"…Really?" she asked.
Barns told her what Jazz and Thundercracker had told him—that they had encountered the Fallen in Germany and somehow managed to use the Fallen's own weapon against him. His death had triggered the deactivation of the drones.

They had… won. Not just against the Decepticons.

They had beaten the drones, at long, long last.

Kass had literally nothing to say to that. She was still struggling to understand the fact that she had survived a battle on her own back in Kandahar. Her friends were okay. The Decepticons were on the run. The Hyperion was damaged, but the Nemesis was in ruins, according to one of the soldiers she had heard talking.

They had not lost.

They had won.

Barns was also in a state of shock, so the two of them sat together silently waiting for someone to tell them where to go. Kass stared out at the busy scene and wondered just when life would make sense again.

They were on board another plane in less than an hour. They landed in an airport somewhere in California, but not the Los Angeles International. That had been devastated by the battle for Los Angeles and the entire south half of the city was still beating down fires and handling stray ‘Cons. Kass had expected to wait around awkwardly for another long hour before being shuffled off to Plumas, or some other base, but there were distractions at this airport. Very good distractions.


She followed his line of sight to the other side of the airplane hangar they were in and a gasp strangled in her throat. "Bluestreak!"

Both humans ran across the open floor toward the Praxian, who was seated against some cargo containers. He was alone; Vortex and Rachel weren't in sight. There was a NEST soldier with a magazine lounging next to the mech as if simply keeping Bluestreak company; it wasn't a face Kass recognized. Still, she felt a shrill sense of relief and joy just being able to see her mech friend.

However, the relief faded slightly when she noticed he did not get up to greet her. He was covered in scratches and burn marks. Part of his chest seemed caved in and his optics were dimmer than they should have been. He still recognized them and waved in a jerky, disconnected way. The soldier looked up finally and nodded at both Barns and Kass.

"Bluestreak?" Kass asked the moment she was able to slide to a stop in front of him. Barns was peering around, looking for any others. Where were Vortex and Rachel? How badly was Bluestreak injured?

Despite seeming to be unable to move or get up, Bluestreak visibly cheered when she went over and touched his side tentatively. "K-a-ass," he said, in a hissing voice.

Kass froze, and next to her, Barns' jaw dropped. She stared up at her friend in alarm. He sounded like there was something wrong with his vocalizer, but his throat was in tact. What—why was his voice like that? Why were his eyes still dim?

Before she even had the chance to demand answers, or find a soldier who could get her access to Ratchet, Bluestreak seemed to hear his own voice and he winced.
"S-sorry," he offered. He raised a stiff arm and pointed at his throat. "Ca-an't talk tha-a-at well."

Kass could barely keep a tremble from her limbs. "What happened?" she asked, looking over at the soldier seated near him.

"Cortex destabilization, or something, they said," the soldier replied. She shrugged. "The other two didn't know how to explain it, I guess. He's not in danger of dying." Bluestreak nodded in the same jerky motions.

It took her a moment, but the definition finally crawled into her panicking mind. "Oh... his processors can't connect to certain parts of his frame correctly," she said, recalling the vague condition from one of Ratchet's hasty rants. Thank goodness she had paid attention that day. She looked up at Bluestreak and tried to be positive. "It's fixable, don't worry."

They could handle something like this. Well, Ratchet could. She would never dare touch the inner-workings of a mech's cortex, even if she were the only one available to help. Bluestreak wasn't in danger from that in a non-battle situation, after all. She might be able to fix his exterior injuries, she considered.

Bluestreak tried to lift his hand to her, so she moved closer to help. "Y-you're o-kay," the gray mech stammered. He was far too calm; he probably couldn't express what he was feeling inside. Kass smiled in understanding.

"Yes. I'm okay, Blue," she said. She patted his forearm gently. "Other than this, are you okay?"

"Y-es," he replied.

Barns grinned, relieved as well. "Rachel? Vortex?" They weren't nearby, which was a little alarming.

Bluestreak's doorwing that was still intact twitched. "Ra-achel's get-ting food. Vortex-ex went wi-ith her," he explained, trying to turn to the right to show which direction they'd gone in.

"I'll go get them," Barns offered, moving away already. Kass nodded and decided to remain with Bluestreak. Oh, it was so good to see him. The idea of seeing Rachel and Vortex again was almost hysteria-inducing.

The soldier got up and gave them space, thankfully. Kass scooted the chair so that she could sit closer to Bluestreak, but was unable to rest and found herself fidgeting. She wanted to move, and yet she was exhausted. She wanted to go find the others, but she didn't want to leave Bluestreak alone. Bluestreak was either too tired to move, or he couldn't due to his injuries. Both remained next to each other in silence. It was the kind of silence neither disliked; Kass was just overjoyed she could finally be close to him again.

She wondered how much he had heard. NEST was still fighting to keep their lines up, but the most important pieces of intel had obviously gotten through.

"They say the Fallen is dead," Kass said, looking up at her friend. Trying to imagine Jazz killing that bogeyman was difficult to take in.

Bluestreak's optics glowed brighter. "Y-es."

"And Galvatron." Kass swallowed hard. "They're both dead."

The mech beside her paused. "Th-the dr-o-ones?" he asked.
Kass stared at the floor. "…Dead," she finally said, nodding her head stiffly.

The word resounded again and again inside her mind, until it was more like an echo of a whisper. She was unable to look up. All of her focus was drawn to a void, where the impossibility of their situation had finally broken down the rational pessimism that had always grounded her.

They had really won. They really, truly had.

"...Ka-a-ss?" Bluestreak asked quietly, watching her with concern.

Kass shook her head and didn't reply. After nearly forty hours of chaos, it was now that she had the chance to reflect. There was much to think about.

But thoughts of war faded in importance when she had the time to think back to where they had all come from. To think about what this victory had actually meant.

She thought of her parents. Her brother. Her friends, her friends' families, seven billion souls in another world—

This was for you.

Leaning her head against her friend, Kass cried, in grief and a hollow sense of relief.

This was for you.

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*Edwards Air Force Base*
*Edwards, California*

Thundercracker had fallen into recharge during the flight, but he jolted awake when they landed and Jazz urged him to get up. It took a moment to shut off his battle protocols, but the fear of a fight died instantly when they disembarked and he realized they had a welcoming party.

Rachel greeted them first and Thundercracker could barely withstand the onslaught of emotions that hit him when they were able to embrace her. She was physically fine and did her best not to cry.

"Good job," he told her. She smiled and hugged his hand. Thundercracker gripped her as much as he could to reciprocate. He nodded to Vortex, thankful for the mech keeping her safe all that time.

It wasn't just Rachel and Vortex that were waiting there for them. Barns had also arrived and beside him were Kass and Bluestreak. Hugs were exchanged and Jazz was quickly overwhelmed with questions ("did you guys really kill him?"). Thundercracker was grateful when everyone was distracted by the noisy arrival of the remaining half of their family.

Flying off of Arcee, Danny was the first of the arriving trio to run toward them in front of the unfamiliar hangar. Kass laughed and waved at the excited woman as she barreled their way.

"Danny!" Barns shouted. Elated, he opened his arms just in time to accept her hug, swinging her partially in the air.

"Guys!" Danny was yelling. She hugged him tightly, though she spoke to everyone. "Oh, guys! You're okay!"

"We're all okay," Kass told her, laughing again when Danny flung into her arms too.
Nearly as fast, Wildrider had transformed. His appearance was shocking, considering that the last time Thundercracker had seen the red-and-black mech he had been on a medical berth, but Wildrider wasted no time in hurrying over. He didn't seem to know where to look first as he glanced around their circle.

"Leetle Rachel! Kass!" Wildrider grabbed both women and clutched them close to his chestplates in a way that made Thundercracker smile. "О, я так рад, что вы в безопасности!" He crouched lower to get close to Barns as well. "Barns!"

Arcee came up last and nodded at both Thundercracker and Jazz. "It is good to see you all," she said. She bent down to embrace Barns lightly. "All of you."

Jazz had known that they had run into trouble at Plumas, but he hadn’t heard that Wildrider had again defied fate and gotten into the fray with the drones. Arcee seemed unhappy about it, but she did admit he had done an excellent job. They all had, apparently. Sam Witwicky and his other human friend had helped in the fight, too.

"Miles? Really?" Kass asked, astonished.

Rachel scoffed. "He's my uncle, remember?" Jazz laughed loudly at that.

They would be staying at the base overnight. It was nearly nine at that point. Thundercracker thought the traveling had worn them down even more than the fighting. The humans stumbled off to get a shower (Kass was very adamant that sand was now officially the most offensive substance on Earth) and the mechs were left to share an informal debriefing.

"How'd the drones go down South?" Jazz asked as he sat down gingerly. Everyone needed a thorough check-up when Ratchet arrived. Bluestreak had first dibs, however.

"Killed a lot, plus some mechs," Vortex replied. He reached over and knocked Bluestreak gently on the helm, making the gunner wince a little. Vortex was astonishingly lighthearted about it, which made Thundercracker pause. "And this boltbrain decided to let a building fall on him."

"I-I didn't d-do it on pur-pose," Bluestreak complained. He fidgeted uncomfortably, even when Wildrider whined and curled up next to him. "Ra-atch-et will fix i-it."

"He will," Jazz assured him. He grinned at both mechs. "Good job, guys. You did great."

They all had their successes. By the time the humans got back (soaking wet because they didn't want to spend unnecessary time away from the others), Thundercracker was seated in awe. So much had happened. It was a little unbelievable.

Rachel was still trying to dry her hair with a towel. "Kass took down a Gestalt team, Jazz took out the Fallen, Prime killed Galvatron, and Vortex is badass," she said, voice muffled until she finally looked up at the rest of them. "Like, I can honestly say I wasn't expecting any of that, except the last one."

Kass smiled sheepishly as she buttoned up a warmer shirt. Even here in LA, it was cold out at night. "I just helped… it wasn't like I actually fought Devastator by myself…"

"Still." Rachel held a crushed bottle of water boldly in the air, wearing one of her rare grins. "Our family—the most badass family on Earth."

That earned more than a few similar smirks. "Cheers," Barns agreed, and those who had drinks
Thundercracker saw Danny grow quiet first. She had listened to the story of what happened to their enemies without question, but there was a clear unease in her eyes once everyone settled down more and there was enough silence to be able to reflect.

"So…what does this all mean?" Danny asked, causing many of the others to look at her in surprise.

There was a pause. "Ve von?" Wildrider offered, optics narrowing.

Arcee looked at Jazz quickly. "Really?" she asked, in a voice quieter than normal.

Vortex also hesitated. "Won… the war?" he added, sounding incredulous.

It would have been crazy to suggest that just one battle, after so many eons of fighting, would be enough to end the fighting once and for all, but… that had not been an ordinary battle. Thundercracker looked around their group and realized no one was sure.

Danny licked her lips and seemed to think it all over inside her head. She picked at the hem of her jacket.

"…I think we did," she said. She looked up at the silver mech closest to her. "Jazz?"

Jazz looked like a deer caught in headlights, a phrase Goddard had once used. "I…” the saboteur began, hesitating. He looked utterly lost. "I don't know. I have no idea."

"Well, it's a start," Kass offered. She smiled at the rest of their friends. "A very good start." Barns nodded, and even the more uneasy members of their group seemed reassured.

Their confidence was enough to make Thundercracker smile and want nothing more than to settle down with them all. They had earned this quiet, this peace. Even if their hopes were too high, and the fighting recommenced tomorrow, at least for now…

Jazz's spark was alive with unrest. Thundercracker looked over at his mate and saw how far away Jazz's gaze was, even as their friends talked quietly about their next plans, which pretty much could only be to get real answers from NEST about what they had to do next. Kass began to work on repairing the basic injuries the mechs had sustained, starting with Vortex. Barns told them about his job in Germany. Arcee made them laugh over her horror at allowing Starscream to help them in Plumas, and Wildrider filled in with useless details of his own fight. Jazz ignored them all, but not intentionally.

Thundercracker rumbled lowly and touched Jazz's shoulder. The light touch made Jazz flinch. Their optics met and Thundercracker still couldn't get a good read on what was causing Jazz's distress.

With the ease of a spring, Jazz uncoiled from the ground. He ignored Rachel's concern and walked away on unsteady feet from the group. Thundercracker nodded at their friends and got up to follow him, knowing that he needed space and having everyone crowd him now would be bad.

It hurt to move and he could barely walk on his injured leg, but Thundercracker made sure he hobbled toward Jazz, who had stopped short of the hangar door. The smaller mech was looking out at the airfield that still buzzed with military movement.

Further away, there were stars that gleamed down. Thundercracker took a moment to look at the late December sky and that grounded him.
"Jazz?" he finally asked, closing the distance between them.

Stiff-jointed, Jazz turned and looked up at the Seeker with a wide-optic’d, frightened expression. For a moment, he seemed speechless.

"...I don't know what to do," the silver mech said. He shook his helm slowly, sounding so much smaller than he actually was. "I don't know what to do next, TC."

Did any of them? They had never had a future. There was never a point in planning life after the war, or after the apocalypse, because those events had never granted them an opportunity to consider a future without death.

With gentle hands, Thundercracker drew Jazz closer and stared down at his bondmate.

"Good," the jet said. He dared to smile faintly. "That's a good thing, Jazz."

It meant they had the choice to decide for themselves. No orders from officers, no death warrants handed to them by monsters or enemies.

Just… them. Them, and their family.

The choice was finally theirs.

Jazz embraced him and Thundercracker shuttered his optics. He reveled in that assuredness. For the first time in a long, long time, he was granted the chance to be at peace with those he cared for.

This was the beginning of everything.

**End Chapter 47.**

Chapter End Notes

It ain't over yet, kiddies. Time to wrap up some loose ends.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Second to last chapter (with an interlude also between them)! :D Sam makes plans for his new future, Barns and Danny meet an old friend, and Optimus sees brighter times. Thank you, Shantastic!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Plumas NEST Base
California

It was one week after the end of the end of the world and Sam was still trying to catch up.

It wasn't like there was a steady stream of information coming his way, not when he was all the way at the bottom of the information food chain, but Sam heard plenty from Lennox and the 'Bots. No one was cheering, or talking about throwing a parade. It was all straightforward "this is how it went" talk.

The teams in China and Brazil had fought valiantly against both the Decepticon forces and the drones, winning both battles. The U.S. Fourth Fleet was working with allies in South America, and the Chinese felt confident they could handle any Decepticon incursions that might be attempted. Here in America, Optimus had led the Los Angeles team to success bringing down a large portion of the Decepticons on Earth, including Galvatron.

In Germany, of course, the European team had handled a large influx of drones. And… the Fallen. Rumors were running wild, but Sam had heard the truth from Barns himself. Jazz and Thundercracker had brought down the Fallen.

It was a lot to take in, and days later Sam still found himself walking around the Plumas base (under repair for the second time that year) in a quiet reverie. Mikaela was safe and already back to work helping Ratchet patch up those Autobots who needed repairs. Miles was back in Nevada for the first time in a month; his 'disappearance' a month ago had strained his relations with his mother.

Sam had called his parents only twice in the last week, and even then, he had kept it short. He didn't know what to tell them. They had seen the news, just like the rest of the world, but they didn't know what Sam's role in it had been. All they needed, all they wanted to know right now was that he hadn't been in any of the major battles and that he and Mikaela were both uninjured. That was enough for them.

The rest of the world, however…

Sam had spent several hours laughing at the television, almost to the point of minor hysteria, when
the hours and hours of repeat footage of the battle in LA had finally melted into commentary by news pundits. He wanted to punch most of them in the face for the things they said about the Autobots—that they had endangered lives unnecessarily, that they had caused more damage than they had prevented— but everyone kept telling him that was to be expected.

There were so many unknowns, Sam couldn't blame people for panicking even after the word of their victory went global. People were cheering that the "bad aliens" were "gone," but there was still a prevailing sense of fear. Even though NEST and the Autobots forces had succeeded, the world was still asking, "What next?"

Sam was asking that, too. He didn't pry into the plans of the Autobots, or of NEST, because he knew whatever they decided, his opinion wouldn't matter. He was content with that. He was just as happy to sit on the sidelines, watching as his friends moved toward some sort of happiness and peace.

Plumas was safe now, especially since they had a lot more Autobots around than usual. The Decepticons on Earth were in hiding and being hunted down, and the rest had fled into space. A section of the Nemesis had survived the energy weapon assault, which the US Navy had apparently been hiding this whole time, and been captured by the Autobots from the Hyperion. They were currently using it as an impromptu prison for any mechs they captured or that surrendered. Not many had, unfortunately.

They needed time to heal. All of them. Sam thought he would head back to Tranquility in a few days, with Mikaela, to try to clear his head. For now, he was okay wandering the base in quiet thought. He ignored almost everyone he encountered, at least until he reached the south end of the compound.

Looking up into the gray air, Sam smiled up at Bumblebee.

"Hey, Bee," he said, tucking his hands further down into his jacket pockets. Without his adrenaline rushing, it was sure cold out. Sam could deal with it, however.

The Autobot had been walking toward him and now stopped. "Sam," Bumblebee replied. His optics shone bright with a smile. "I saw Mikaela earlier."

"Yeah, she's doing okay," Sam said. He tried to keep the tense nervousness in his gut out of his smile as he recalled the stories Mikaela had brought back with her. It was a bit much to take in, even though he had survived his own moment of violence here on the base. "I'm really, really glad she made it out of L.A. in one piece."

Bumblebee started to walk, and Sam began to walk with him. "Optimus said she did wonderfully, and wasn't in harm's way," the Autobot said calmly, a voice of reason that reassured Sam and eased some of his tension.

Sam nodded, walking easily next to the mech; Bumblebee was clearly walking slowly for his sake. "Good."

His girlfriend had survived one of the more intense battles for Earth. Galvatron had been killed just a few miles from where she was working to patch up injured Autobots. She had worked hard and more than earned the commendation Optimus had given her in front of the NEST team. He had thanked all of them for their efforts. No one had slacked. Everyone had given their all, and that was a humbling feeling for Sam.

"I never got the chance to thank you," Bumblebee said, bringing him out of his thoughts. Bumblebee smiled at Sam's confused expression. "For helping last week. You and Miles both."
That made Sam laugh a little, recalling his rather meager attempt to answer the call to battle. "Hey, you big guys did all the real fighting," he pointed out.

Bumblebee tilted his helm. "You helped, Sam," he said firmly, with all the sort of warmness and friendship that defined him.

A few weeks ago, Sam might have argued.

Instead, Sam laughed again and looked away.

"...you're welcome," he said. He watched as pale clouds drifted overhead. "Thanks for saving us."

"I did no more than anyone else, but it was my pleasure," Bumblebee replied. There was a small pause, punctuated by the sound of their feet on the concrete in their slow loop of the compound, and then he asked, "How are you?"

Twitching at the question as well as a sudden gust of cold wind, Sam took a few seconds to consider his answer.

"Okay, I guess," he admitted at length.

Bumblebee slowed even more. "You guess?" he prompted.

Sam shrugged. "It's all a lot to take in." There was no point in avoiding the truth.

"How so?"

How were things not too much to hear, digest and accept as reality lately? Sam chuckled and shook his head.

"The Decepticons are on the run… Galvatron and the Fallen guy are dead…" he began, trying to remember what he had witnessed after he was sure his friends were (mostly) intact. "CNN is still freaking out and I'm about to freak out on FOX for all their bad-mouthing of the Autobots for what happened in Los Angeles…." He shrugged again. "It's a lot."

Bumblebee rumbled lowly. "True."

Sam bit the inside of his cheek. "Where did the 'Cons go?" he asked finally, glancing up at his friend. That question had haunted him for days. No one outside the loop of top level information wanted to really ask, though.

As usual, Bumblebee made it seem that Sam was included in that group of individuals, sharing the information he had, even though it was probably all watered down. "Most are probably in hiding on Earth. We will hunt them down, or force those in hiding to come forward in surrender," he explained. He waved at a distant Jolt who jogged past them. "Many of the fliers and those on Nemesis tried to escape from the planet and the moon, so we'll have to scour the solar system thoroughly."

Sam considered all of that and wondered how they were going to enforce that "hunting them down" rule. It would require the Autobots to span the globe and interact with even more foreign governments... The global media machine was having a field day covering what little information the governments were allowing them. The continuing pursuit of the Decepticons would keep the Autobots in the public eye, requiring more frequent international stops and public interactions. Not to mention the unofficial viral videos.
It would be interesting, Sam reasoned, to say the least.

"And… it's true? What's left of Nemesis is on the dark side of the moon?" That much had only been a rumor in the news, but Sam had a feeling it wasn't too far from the mark.

Bumblebee nodded. "Yes. For now, at least. It's the only suitable prison we can afford right now."

Trying to envision a mech-sized Alcatraz somewhere in deep space far, far away from Earth and failing, Sam tried to focus on the more positive aspect of that.

"Man, I can't believe we took a whole star ship," he said, grinning. He looked up at a barely-visible moon, wondering what was happening up there now. He was so glad that he wouldn't have to offer his assistance there. "That's even bigger than winning a battle down here, right?"

"Yes and no." Bumblebee did a little mech-shrug. "The pulse weapon your Navy used destroyed most of Nemesis and left that section of the ship without defenses. Ultra Magnus led the Hyperion's crew well in taking advantage of the situation and using the aid the human fliers were able to offer, so it was risky to take Nemesis, but not impossible. They did well." Slowly Bumblebee stopped walking and Sam saw the mech was staring out into the forest behind the metal fencing. "The battles here on Earth were far more challenging, considering how sparsely dispersed our troops were."

Sam stared out at the forest for as long as he could, but the nervousness started to itch at his chest again. He turned to his friend and thought about all of that. He didn't know what to make of it. Or rather, he didn't know what he was allowed to make of it.

"…So…" he trailed off, looking up again.

Bumblebee stared back patiently. "So."

Sam squinted his eyes. "The Autobots won?" It was almost impossible to say out loud, to speak of it as a definite fact after two years of doubt.

The yellow Autobot shook his head. "No. Not yet. We have made a huge step forward, I will admit. There are many trials yet to come," he said. His door panels twitched, however, like he was holding back a similar nervousness. "Optimus is certain we have won Earth, though."

"...And…" Sam shifted on his feet. "That means… Earth is safe." It felt ridiculous saying that so simply.

"Yes, Sam." Bumblebee smiled and lowered himself down so they were almost face to face. "Humanity fought with all it had, and it won. The Autobots can take only minimal credit. You are the ones who deserve the honor of victory here for your world."

"We couldn't have done it without you," Sam said, meaning it. There was no way they'd ever have gotten close to this success without the Autobots. Their guidance, their firepower…

"Perhaps not, but we certainly could not have done it without you either," Bumblebee replied. He looked away and seemed to reflect on his own thoughts. "I am glad. I am very glad Earth is safe, for all of you."

Sam tried to ignore how his throat went dry. "For you, too."

"I don't know if your leaders will give us asylum or not," Bumblebee replied. He said it wryly, as if it were a joke, but they all knew how serious it was. "There are talks going on now. We may set up a settlement on Mars."

The Autobots were being sent that far away? It wasn't far in cosmic sense, but…

"Not close for human technology yet, but don't worry, Sam. I won't leave you," Bumblebee replied, automatically knowing the root of Sam's distress. "Optimus has asked your government to extend immigration VISAs to several of those under his leadership." He paused and then added in amusement, "Including the time travelers."

That took a second to sink in. "…They're going to get Green Cards?" Sam asked, intrigued.

"The humans definitely will. They don't have any other place to go, after all," Bumblebee replied. He sat down with a quiet creak and settled as Sam moved in to sit close as well. "And, if your Congress agrees, there will be a formal system set up for any Autobot who wishes to obtain citizenship as well. England and France have also agreed to such set-ups."

"Wait…but…" Sam tried to follow that. "You can't be an Autobot anymore?"

Bumblebee seemed amused still. "No, we can. It will be complicated, but at the very least, I will be able to live in your country as a legal alien. Maybe even a citizen in time." He laughed, the sound only faintly staticy. "I know your press will just love that."

The press would, wouldn't it? Sam scoffed. "Oh, man… O'Reilly's gonna have a field day," he joked. He grinned and patted his friend's knee. "I'm happy, though. I'm really happy you can stay, Bee. I don't know what I'd do if you couldn't."

"I would never leave you if I could help it, Sam," the mech replied. He leaned his head closer, his shadow a comfort. "You are my best friend."

Sometimes, it was impossible to understand how the media could claim the mechs didn't feel, or couldn't understand human relationships. If Sam had learned anything, it was that the humans were the ones who had to learn how to feel more like the 'Bots. He smiled at his companion and nodded.

"You're my best friend, too," he said, meaning it with everything he had. He paused and shoved his hands back into his pockets. "Thank you."

"For what?" Bumblebee asked, surprised.

Everything was probably a better response, but Sam simply smiled. "Meeting me."

The blue lights that made up Bumblebee's eyes glowed softer. "Oh, Sam…" He tilted his helm gently. "Thank you for the same."

It was cold, and there was a fence separating them from the actual grass, but Sam didn't care. He dropped down onto the tarmac and decided to enjoy the fresh air with his friend all the same. Bumblebee probably couldn't feel things the way humans did physically, but he could enjoy the peace and quiet like anyone else could.

Peace and quiet.

Sam laughed again softly.

"I guess I should think about the future now," he said, musing. "I don't have any way of participating in your war now. No need."
"I hope not," Bumblebee replied, picking up the conversation without a hitch. "Most likely it will be off-planet fighting that remains. The only unsecured high ranking Decepticon who could lead a threat against us is Shockwave. But our information suggests he is nowhere near this location in space."

"True." Sam bit his lip. "I guess that means they're not going to need soldiers after this, huh?"

Bumblebee rumbled lowly. "They won't need many new ones, at least," he replied. "NEST will remain active, in case we are surprised, but we will continue to be optimistic for now."

Sam stared up at the sky, considering.

"But they're always going to need someone to tell the rest of the world what happened to you," he added.

"And to you," Bumblebee pointed out. He turned his helm and stared at Sam expectantly.

Sam arched an eyebrow. "I never liked history," he said. He smirked. "But I guess since this kinda happened to me, maybe I can make it work."

His guardian returned the amused gesture. "The protection and distribution of knowledge is never a bad thing, Sam," he replied. "You will excel at whatever you do."

Taking a deep breath, Sam lay back and looked up at the sky overhead. "Thanks, buddy."

"You're welcome, Sam," Bumblebee said affectionately.

The lull that followed was filled with a quiet sense of rightness that made all of Sam's fears of the future fade. They had plenty of time to worry about politics, renegade generals, and any other trouble this crumbling war could throw at them yet. Now… now was the time to rest and enjoy that quiet.

It truly was a beautiful afternoon.

Sam closed his eyes and sighed.

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Being back on the Plumas base gave everyone a sense of normalcy. For Barns, there was also a sense of urgency. A good kind, but a real kind of urgency. It made it difficult to sleep, even when surrounded by friends and curled up with his fiancée.

Apparently, one of the first things the United States government wanted to do, after rounding up the Decepticons remaining on Earth, was to get rid of all the Autobots. That made Barns uneasy, but once Optimus and Lennox explained it to everyone during a large conference several days after the Plumas crew was reunited, it was understandable.

It wasn't like the United States was literally throwing the Autobots out the door, thankfully, though many in power wanted that desperately. Keller was holding on strong and the President was on their side. The majority of the public wanted the Autobots gone as soon as possible, but they didn't want to be seen as kicking their saviors to the curb either.

The deal, Prowl told them, was that the Hyperion had to leave Earth's air space, which was acceptable. It would be temporarily stationed on the moon, where it would be used to monitor Nemesis. Eventually, they'd be moving to Mars, where, in theory, a settlement would be devised for all Cybertronians needing shelter. This was final, since many human leaders were opposed to "giving
so many liberties" to the aliens, but as Keller put it, it wasn't like Mars was humanity's to give or refuse anyway.

The Autobots were still playing nice, however, as always. Barns admired Prime's resolve to give humanity the leading role in deciding how to handle their Autobot allies. He had faith in their generosity, so it was difficult to remain too pessimistic.

Barns was astonished and flattered when Prime asked him, as well as WJ and Jazz, to help play a role in the organization of the Mars colony. If it did pass Congress' approval, and the humans helped give resources to the Cybertronians, they'd need to make sure they were efficient in how they designed the settlement. Barns was honored and agreed to help as much as he could. He was incredibly interested in helping WJ find a way to improve Earth shuttles so that the humans could travel to Mars also, sending their own supplies independent of Cybertronian ships. Since the Autobots weren't going to share their military weapons, the humans were very intent on at least gleaning what they could from their engineering and space technology.

But that was a long time away. In the meantime, Barns looked forward to taking online classes and getting even more knowledge to prepare himself for the job ahead of him. Engineering was fun and simple to him; he knew that sooner or later, he'd be helping his friends and allies to build their own home. It was the least he could do, considering how much they had given to him and his friends.

The Autobots weren't the only ones preparing for a future home. His family was still reeling from at the abrupt cessation of hostilities, trying to figure out what to do next. Kass was still apprenticing under Ratchet and hoped to someday be a full time medic on Earth for any mechs who needed it, once the Alien Citizenship Act passed (oh, how the American leaders didn't like that one either.)

The four humans were scheduled to get their own green cards soon, which eased some tension. That meant they would all be able to stay in the US and continue the educations the military was providing for them, although only Danny was interested in using it for her future (a degree in media studies wasn't exactly going to be a good provider for her, but it made her happy). Kass had a teacher all her own, and Rachel just liked taking classes for learning, but she had a solid future as it was.

"You're going to be a soldier?" Danny had asked her.

Rachel had shrugged. "If they need me, I'll shoot things," she said. "I'm not leaving Earth anytime soon, but I'm going to help with the Decepticon round ups."

That was a long-term career for a human, so Barns was happy for her as well. The mechs in their group would eventually have to decide what they wanted to do, but Barns knew that none of them would leave Earth, even if the colony was a success. Their home was here now. And since they would have the chance to make a real home, there was no reason to leave.

Happiness was sorely won, but they were going to make the most of it. Barns was sure.

That afternoon, he had spent a decent amount of time with Danny, just relaxing and unpacking his things at long last from his trip overseas. Danny had been content to read a magazine while he quietly folded shirts, but after awhile, she rolled over to face him.

"Have you told everyone about us yet?" she asked suddenly.

Barns glanced at her, arching an eyebrow. "About us what?"

Danny made a tsking sound and put her hands on her hips. "Being engaged!" she exclaimed, as if he should have read her mind.
Yes. That. Barns laughed and put his last pile of clothing away in the cooler he used as a dresser. "Oh… not yet," he said. He grinned wickedly. "Want to surprise them now?"

"Sure!" Danny said, giggling. She linked arms with him and they started walking toward the front of the hangar, ignoring the parts of the roof that were missing still. "Oh, man, Rachel and Kass are going to freak out, but Wildrider is going to have a full out panic attack!"

"One surprise after another," Barns replied, chuckling. He knew they were going to cause a real stir, and he was glad for it. They needed this sort of thing. "It is a good time—"

"Hey! Hey, wait! Rancourt, wait up!"

Both of them stopped and Barns turned around quickly to see where the shout had come from. He was surprised to see a soldier in army fatigues rushing up to them. He had said his name specifically, but Barns could not think of a single reason why an unfamiliar soldier would know him, or need to talk to him. Surely, they hadn't started planning for the colony yet…?

When the soldier skidded to a stop before him and grinned expectantly at Barns, the confusion only grew. He wasn't wearing a name tag on his shirt either.

"Euh?" Barns stared uncomprehendingly at the unfamiliar man. Brown hair, tall, almost familiar if he squinted… "Yes…?"

"It's me, Joe," the soldier said, happy for some reason. Barns' lack of greeting didn't faze him. He gestured at himself. "You got me outta trouble, back in Germany."

That almost clicked. "I… did?" Barns froze and abruptly realized who the man was. Back in Wiesbaden, on the base—this was the soldier he had helped escape from the drones! "Oh! Forgive me! I didn't recognize you."

Thankfully, Joe laughed. It was oddly familiar. "Don't worry about it. I just transferred in from the Midwest. I wanted to thank you in person for saving my life," he said good-naturedly. "All you guys really came through for us."

He didn't think he deserved that much praise; he had only done what was natural. Still, he understood where Joe was coming from. Everyone there deserved recognition for doing what little they could.

"This is my fiancée, Danielle Elizabeth," Barns offered, smiling as Danny stepped up.

Always one to like meeting new people, Danny grinned and shook Joe's hand exuberantly. "Hi!"

"Pleasure to meet you, miss," Joe said, grinning back. He turned and pointed behind him. "Here comes my little lady now."

Barns looked over and saw a dark haired woman walking over slowly to them. She smiled and glanced over at Joe as if waiting for the affirmative to come closer as not to interrupt anything. She was definitely not military, considering she was holding a baby and was dressed in civilian clothing.

"Joe?" she asked, peering at the two young adults in front of them. Her baby was probably only two years old. He had the same dark hair his father had. Danny smiled at the baby, who had a small toy car in one hand.

"Ah, right. Theresa, this is Barnaby Rancourt," Joe began, gesturing between them. Barns shook Theresa's hand and smiled at her. Joe seemed pleased. "Major Lennox told me where to find you."
Barns hesitated when he realized he didn't know the man's surname. "I'm sorry, I never caught your last name…?"

Joe blinked, and then slapped a hand to his forehead. "Oh, sorry! My fault with that. I always tend to forget that part, right, honey? Our first date was a riot…" He chuckled while his wife sighed and rocked their son. Joe turned and helped his hand out properly to Barns. "Anyway, name's Captain Joseph Goddard."

Instinct told Barns to take the extended hand, but every one of his limbs had frozen up. He stared—gawked, really—at Joe and his wife—and then his son. Joe hesitated and lowered his hand a little. That made Barns' brain react, though he was vaguely certain anything more complex than talking would be impossible for him.

"…Goddard?" he repeated, eyes wide.

That…

That was impossible.

Beside him, Danny was also staring with similar eyes, speechless.

"Yeah," Joe replied, smiling uncertainly. He fidgeted as he gestured back at his wife and son. "And this, this is our son, Piers. I've applied to work with NEST, and since they're finally building some civilian dorms down in Plumas, Piers and Theresa will be sticking around."

Barns slowly looked down at the bundle of pudgy legs and the small face that peered back at him with wide brown eyes.

He knew those eyes.

Danny reached out and grabbed hold of his arm. Her grip was tight; she was trembling.

Barns looked up at Joe and realized he had to find his voice.

"May I?" he asked in a hoarse voice. He looked back at the baby and weakly lifted his arms.

Theresa looked uncertain about their behavior, but Joe was more lenient. He took the baby from his wife and moved a little closer.

"Sure… are you two okay?" he asked

Barns swallowed against the lump in his throat and nodded. "Yes…"

He forced the shake out of his arms to be able to lift them and accept the wriggling bundle of clothing and uncomfortable gurgling and half-words. The baby didn't like being away from his mother, but he settled once he looked up and saw two new faces peering down at him. The toddler stared curiously and didn't seem to know what to make of them.

Gently bringing him closer in a more secure position, Barns smiled kindly at the infant and blinked back stinging eyes.

"Hello, Goddard," he said quietly, leaning closer to Danny, who smiled through her own set of tears.

Barns bowed his head and felt his heart break in the only good way possible.

"We are going to be very good friends," he whispered, promising it.
The baby didn't smile. He more smirked, in a way that was just as familiar to him as seeing the sun rise or feeling the touch of family.

*It is so good to see you again.*

0000

"Vortex."

The helicopter froze when he heard his name called. He was about to drink a cube of energon in the back of the still-ruined hangar when he felt two familiar mechs appear behind him. He had been so lost in thought—thinking of many different things, such as being around his companions after the risky few last weeks—he hadn't even noticed them.

When he turned and saw who it was, he didn't feel relief as much as, well, minor intimidation.

"...Jazz." Vortex forced his propellers to keep still as his gaze went from the smiling saboteur all the way up to the impassive blue jet beside him. "Thundercracker."

*Shit.*

Considering the last few times either or both of those two mechs had cornered him in the last decade, Vortex was wary. He was more than wary when he realized that there was no else in a fifty-foot radius.

*Double shit.*

"Been lookin' fer ya," Jazz said, all too pleasantly, which made the red flags going up in Vortex's processors flash scarlet.

It was true that they had all been busy for the last several days, since there were a lot of jobs yet to handle besides Decepticon hunting. Vortex had decided to help around the base, like the others in their group of ten, simply to stay in the area. It was also true that Vortex had had few opportunities alone with either Jazz or Thundercracker. They had managed to have a short reconciliatory period after he returned to the base from his undercover mission, so Vortex had assumed that was the end of the guilt trip the two had given themselves.

There was no guilt in either mech's face, however, so Vortex knew it would not be that simple.

"Had to help with construction," he replied. He tried not to show his nervousness. "What's up?"

Jazz, who was probably keen enough to notice the tension, continued to act cheerful. "We never got the chance t' thank ya properly," he explained without actually explaining anything.

"For?" Vortex asked, frowning behind his mask.

"Bein' there fer Rachel," Jazz said. He ignored Vortex's surprised twitch. "I know she can hold her own, but I also know ya probably helped t' keep her safe down in Brazil. We can't thank you enough, mech." Beside him, Thundercracker nodded in agreement.

Back in their world, giving thanks for saving another's life wasn't too common. When the newer members of their entourage had arrived, they'd say it a lot, but as time had gone on, the gratitude had been expressed silently. Words were unnecessary when it was a day-to-day occurrence. Vortex was surprised, and even warier now, that both mechs in front of him were taking the time to say this so sincerely.
"...Don't mention it," he said gruffly. He tried to edge to the side, making it clear he wanted to leave. He didn't handle gratitude well, and they knew it.

"Don' leave yet," Jazz said, hurriedly blocking Vortex's path. His ever-present smile was almost scary now. "There's somethin' else we need t' discuss."

Vortex urged the must-flee-now feeling out of his legs. "What?"

Jazz glanced up at Thundercracker before both looked at him with similarly intense optics. "I know we've given ya a hard time. Harder than we had ta. I remember Wheeljack cussin' me out fer bein' such a hard aft," Jazz began, not realizing that with every word, Vortex became more uneasy. "I ain't apologizin', cause there's a lot of shit that's happened t' that girl that I don't even wanna talk about. She'll tell ya in her own time, but believe me when I say, I had a right t' give ya a hard time fer chasin' after her."

This was exactly what Vortex had feared this discussion would be about. He stood his ground, regardless.

"We've made our own choices," he said stiffly. "She has, specifically."

Never in a hundred vorns had Vortex expected her to make that choice, but he was far from disappointed. He didn't trust Thundercracker's impassive faceplates, nor Jazz's calmness. They had always protested their… relationship, even before it was a relationship.

"An' she chose you," Jazz agreed. He grinned when Vortex tensed up again. "I could tell. She looks at ya differently than anyone else." He paused and inclined his helm. "In fact, she has fer awhile."

"She's a woman now," Vortex pointed out carefully, unsure where Jazz was going with this. He hated it when he could understand their motives.

"Yeah, she is," Jazz agreed. Thundercracker also nodded. "An' what she does with her life is her business."

"But we have the right to worry," Thundercracker added, optics slightly narrowed.

"Don't."

"You aren't," Thundercracker said suddenly. "Which is why we're saying go ahead."

Vortex froze. "...What?" he asked.

Jazz grinned. "You heard him," he said, cheeky. "Consider this our parental go-ahead."

"...You're accepting our relationship?" he asked, scrambling for words. All those years of posturing, of the fighting, of the humiliating resistance—

"We're sayin', you slaggin' earned it, Vortex," Jazz said, smile turning almost wry. He leaned into Thundercracker's side. "Thank you."

Vortex gaped at the two of them. He had always told himself that their opinions didn't matter, but hearing it out loud… the validation was not supposed to matter.

"Take care of her and she'll take care of you," Thundercracker continued. He crossed his arms against his canopy. "And if it doesn't work, that doesn't mean we will ever blame you or become angry with you. You are still part of this overall family unit."
"Unless it's really yer fault, but hey, between you an' me, I'm gonna be honest an' say that I know Rachel'll push ya t' yer limits," Jazz said, laughing. He grinned up at the taller Vortex, who was still struggling to understand what had happened. "But you already knew that. You grew up with her all th' same, so I know ya know her. Just like we know you."

Vortex didn't think saying thanks now was appropriate. He wasn't sure what to say over all. "I appreciate it," he said stiffly.

"Sure thing," Jazz said with a laugh. The light in his visor glinted. "An' 'Tex?"

Vortex stared back. "Yes?"

Jazz's grin was both honest and remarkably comforting. "Good luck," he said. It was obvious both he and Thundercracker meant it.

For some odd reason, Vortex was immensely grateful.

"...Thank you," he said against better judgment.

Luck had brought them together, and luck would keep them. Vortex was indeed grateful for every bit he received.

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Prowl was surprised when he felt two familiar EM fields approach him. Turning, he didn't have to look to know that Sideswipe and Sunstreaker were standing right there.

"Yes?" he asked, not sure why they were approaching him now. He had just been on his way to speak with Prime, but he could afford to take his time. They all could now, he mused.

Sunstreaker simply stared at him, which was usual for the grouchy mech. His entire frame was tense, but Prowl could not think of a reason for why the yellow warrior would be angry with him. It meant Sunstreaker was nervous, but that didn't make sense to Prowl.

Sideswipe had always been the easier twin to read. He was also looking at Prowl intensely, however, which made Prowl uneasy.

"Is it true?" the red frontliner asked, voice tight.

"Is what true?" Prowl asked, confused.

"The war," Sideswipe replied. "Is it really over? Jolt keeps saying it is, but we need to hear it from you."

Prowl had no idea what to make of this. He regarded them both carefully, and they both watched him with odd looks, almost like they were afraid of his answer.

"There are still many hurdles to overcome in the coming vorns, including the apprehension of the remaining Decepticons, as well as Shockwave's renegades," he warned, shifting slightly on his pedes. "But as far as my plans go, off the record, I can assure you the worst is indeed over."

With Galvatron, the Fallen, and the majority of the Decepticon generals and Seeker elite either incapacitated or dead, the war was effectively on its last legs. Prowl could see them obtaining true peace in a matter of Earth centuries, not even megavorns. Rebuilding their lost society and trying to recover the loss of the majority of their population would take much longer, but Prowl was still
happy that they could finally see a finish line for their tired army—

Without prompt, Sideswipe closed the distance between them and brought Prowl into a tight hug.

Prowl stared past the frontliner's back, speechless.

"Thank you for getting us through this," Sideswipe said in a quiet voice that didn't match the warrior's grip. Prowl could feel a tremor rattling through his armor, however, and the tension coiled in his frame. Behind him, Sunstreaker nodded silently.

Bewilderment clouded his processors. Prowl tried to make sense of this sudden display of emotion, but he didn't understand. "...I..." he tried to say, faltering. He pulled back and stared up at the taller mech in confusion and struggled to contain a variety of emotions. "I did not do this alone."

Sideswipe shook his helm. "You got me and Sunny through. You promised you would, back at Tyger Pax," he said, sounding more serious than Prowl ever remembered the younger mech sounding. He gripped Prowl's shoulder. "And you did, Prowl."

Sunstreaker moved up next to his brother. "Thank you," he said. For the yellow mech, this display was just as dramatic as Sideswipe's hug. It floored Prowl.

"...Don't..." Prowl began to say, wanting to refuse the gratitude simply because he wasn't the only one who deserved it. But then he remembered whom he was dealing with, and what the twins expected from him. Collecting himself, Prowl stood straighter and smiled faintly. "You are welcome, Sunstreaker, Sideswipe."

Both twins nodded. Sunstreaker relaxed and glanced at his brother hesitantly. A silent exchange was had.

"What do we do next, though?" Sideswipe asked, looking back to Prowl.

What did they do next, indeed? Prowl considered the two mechs carefully. They were built and raised to be fighters. The future in front of them would force them to adapt to a world of, hopefully, peace. He knew they were adaptable, however. That was what defined their species, after all.

"...We remake what we have lost," Prowl replied. He hesitated and met their gazes. The fondness in his spark, which he had curbed with professionalism throughout his time as SIC, grew when he stared down his two soldiers. "Thank you for serving with me, both of you."

Sideswipe smirked and Sunstreaker's lips twitched. The moment was shared between three sparks who knew far too much of each other, rightfully so.

"Our pleasure, commander," Sideswipe replied, not quite as cheeky as usual, as if he meant it.

Prowl smiled back.

The future was theirs, and he would make sure it was bright enough for all of them.

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Hours upon hours had been spent in conversations with delegates, politicians and military leaders. There were two news conferences he had had to attend, specifically because he had not been alive when they had first introduced the Autobots to the human population. Optimus had never been fond of public demonstrations, but he understood the need for it. Especially now.
The world knew his name, his presence and position. They also knew, at long last, the status of the alien war that Prime and his people had brought to Earth. Questions were harsh and rampant. Some of the humans wanted the Autobots gone for good. Most just wanted them to move far enough away that their war wouldn't crush humanity should it suddenly erupt again. Optimus respected that wish the most.

It was possible they could actually grant their request within the decade, if the politics went well. They could not make a settlement anywhere without human help; their resources were a necessity. The benefit of acting now was that the humans did not have easy access to the energy sources the Cybertronians could refine. A rough draft of a treaty, crafted by Prowl and Ultra Magnus, and subject to severe dissection by the American Congress and then the United Nations councils, promised a negotiation that the Autobots would receive the bulk of any early refinements of energon from Earth in order to jumpstart their new home, and afterwards the humans could benefit from the Cybertronians' energy technology. It was a compromise that Keller seemed positive would be approved. All that was in the way was the bureaucratic nightmare that was American politics, but Optimus always hoped for the best.

The Autobot settlement location was still up in the air. While the humans would rather have seen all the mechs leave their solar system entirely, the transportation of building materials and energon was a problem since the humans also wanted the Hyperion and Galaxus far away from Earth's orbit as well. For the humans to have quickest access to the energon themselves, they'd have to move quickly with the construction. And the closest place available was Mars.

There were protests all around the world (both literally and politically) about such a placement. It was too close for most, and too far for the few supporters of the Autobots to remain close by in case Shockwave appeared. Optimus liked the idea of remaining remotely close to Earth as well; there were far too many Decepticons still unaccounted for.

The ones that had survived or surrendered during the battle for Earth were incarcerated within Nemesis, which had been grounded on the Moon temporarily. They'd have to find a suitable prison quickly in order to appease the nervous humans. Nemesis was in shambles, so there was no immediate threat of the Decepticons somehow using it against anyone, but Optimus understood the fear.

For now, it was talking and planning. Optimus found himself enjoying the process more than usual. The fighting had calmed and the only physical threat that remained was the mission ahead to apprehend any Decepticons in hiding on Earth.

They weren't in an active military zone anymore. It was an exhilarating feeling. Stepping outside and gazing up at the blue sky above, Optimus felt freer than he ever had before, even though the rational side of him warned that it was far too soon to expect the end of the war.

Then again, their enemies were scattered. The Decepticon leaders were almost all deceased or incarcerated. The Autobots had a secure planetary base of operations and a billion-member species backing them up readily in case something else occurred.

If this was not the end, Optimus reasoned, it was by far the beginning of the downfall of everything they had known as life for eons.

It was a good, good time to enjoy the peace.

Optimus had left thoughts of politics and future struggles entirely behind that evening as he left the Plumas base on foot. He had had to ask around to find the target he was seeking down, but eventually, he did find the object of his interest sitting alone in the forest.
More like a stone statue than a living mech, Skyfire sat alone on the outcropping of a dirt hill that overlooked trees and parts of the sky, which was tinged with an approaching sunset. Optimus had walked up quietly and reluctantly interrupted the peace and quiet Skyfire had obviously sought here.

"Skyfire," he said, causing the shuttle to look up sharply.

The stone moved; Skyfire immediately started to rise from his seated position. "Prime," he said in greeting, not so much in humility as following some sort of personal rule.

Optimus raised his hands in vain. "Don't get up. I don't need pleasantries. I never did," he said. The quiet joke died from his spark when he was face to face with the gaunt mech. Optimus stood up straighter. "Forgive me for not saying this sooner. I am sorry for your loss."

A flash of something crossed Skyfire's optics. Grief. Remembrance. Whatever it was, it was gone in a second. Skyfire also straightened and met Optimus' gaze calmly.

"What loss?" the shuttle questioned. He smiled softly. "We did what needed to be done. Soundwave would not consider this a loss. We have won."

For a scientist, Skyfire thought like a soldier. That was what the war had done to all of them, Optimus realized. "The battle, yes. The war… perhaps," he agreed.

There were so many unknowns about the state of the war. Optimus was filled with both fear and hope, and he knew others had the same conflicting sense of what was to come as well. They had a good chance. In fact, they had never had a better standing in all the millennia they had been fighting.

"I am surprised," Skyfire said suddenly. "You have not imprisoned Starscream."

Optimus kept his expression neutral. They had not imprisoned the ex-Decepticon aerial commander, though he was still technically to be monitored at all times. No one was happy with how to handle Starscream now, since he was claiming to have no interest in regaining control of the Decepticons, but made it clear he was not going to follow any Autobot rule. Neutrality was the only option he had left, but his thirst for power made that difficult to believe possible. Not even Prowl and Ironhide were sure how to handle him now.

"We made a deal, even if I was not there to make it," Optimus said at length. He inclined his helm. "I will honor the amnesty agreement, granted he does not move against us."

He understood that Skyfire and Starscream had once been companions, so that explained why Skyfire was interested in Starscream's fate now. There was just a faint glow of relief in Skyfire's optics that seemed to support that.

"He will not," the shuttle replied, sounding sure. "We are not the same mechs we both knew. But… in this world, I will take what I can."

Staring at the reserved mech, Optimus wondered what Skyfire intended to do next. He had had one purpose in entering this new world, and that purpose had been achieved. Many of the Autobot command did not like the shuttle for his indifference toward Decepticon-Autobot factions mutually, but Optimus was still unsure what he thought of the mech himself. They had all made sacrifices to reach this point.

Some more than others, the Prime reasoned sadly.

"We will be returning to Vos to rediscover our research," Skyfire said suddenly.
Optimus stared at him carefully. "It is inhabitable," he said carefully. "Most of Cybertron was when we left."

Skyfire seemed to shrug faintly. "We will survive. I have endured worse. I also intend to destroy the space-bridge that is still open there. With Shockwave out there still, the bridge is a risk to Earth." The shuttle shuttered his optics. "It's our choice, should you allow it."

Optimus understood what this meant. He didn't understand why, however.

"Self-made exile… does not fit you, Skyfire," he said, frowning as Skyfire opened his optics again. "You have done so much for us."

That earned him a faint smile. "I have done only what was needed. I was never more than an instrument that moved the true players of this war," Skyfire replied. He folded his hands calmly. "I choose to go, Prime. I… need to. I need to make my own peace, with myself."

"…I understand." Optimus nodded. "Should you, or Starscream, return, I can only hope the colony is there waiting for you." Any mech that arrived there, and who desired neutrality, would always be welcomed.

"Thank you, Optimus," Skyfire said, sounding more earnest than before. He hesitated. "Should you run into my other self, can I ask you give him a message?"

"Of course," Optimus said.

Skyfire's smile was bitter. "Forgive yourself," he said. He inclined his helm. "Please."

Spark filled with both sympathy and unease, Optimus frowned deeply. "Skyfire…"

"I have much to make peace with, but I've started now, Prime," Skyfire said, shaking his helm at the disapproval. "I will not let the sacrifices that brought us to this point mean nothing. We made them in order to better ourselves." He smiled again. It was almost honest. "I will try to do just that."

There would be no convincing him otherwise. Optimus knew the kind of mech Skyfire was. He knew the self-criticism and the doubt that could fill a weary spark. He was no mech to judge another for seeking redemption.

"Stay safe, my friend," Optimus instead offered, reaching out to clasp the shuttle's shoulder in just one brief moment of support.

Skyfire smiled back and touched the offered arm gently. "Good luck," he said, the gesture meant at them both.

It was what they deserved, and what they had always hoped for. It was time to begin again.

End Chapter 48.

Chapter End Notes

Next, we have our final interlude, where TC and Jazz make an important decision.
RUN, PROWL.

A/Ns:
-Most likely Sam will major in history or political science, considering they don't have alien studies yet. Yet. After that, well, you'll just have to see in Adaptions. :)
-Yes, they will explain their story to Goddard's parents. Otherwise, lmfao that would be so awkward.
-Spoiler: baby Goddard is a brat. This is canon.
Chapter Notes

The chapter in which everyone was waiting for since like ever. Sort of. Even if you didn't realize it. This takes place between chapters 48 and 49.

I blame Shantastic for this 100%, no regrets. :)

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We need to talk," Thundercracker began without preamble.

Jazz stretched and relaxed against the larger mech's side as they reclined on the asphalt, alone for the first time in days. "About?"

"Prowl."

The comic look of uneasy surprise that immediately popped up on Jazz's faceplates made Thundercracker sigh.

They had saved the world only a week ago, literally risking their entire family and almost miraculously surviving without more than superficial injury. They'd returned to Plumas two days ago, to recuperate and try to regain some sense of calm. Everyone was both simultaneously giddy and nervous as they tried to figure out what to do with themselves, now that the majority of their enemies were out of the picture. More specifically, the idea of the drones being permanently dead had sent most of the time travelers into a sense of wary delirium.

Jazz had been clingy, naturally, following the events of the battle for Earth. He hadn't needed to say how terrified he had been to find Thundercracker facing the Fallen alone. Thundercracker had seen it shining in his visor and had set himself to the task of reassuring Jazz that it was over and they were both fine. Now that Jazz had realized that fact, in both mind and spark, Thundercracker knew it was time to thrash out another issue. Although neither of them was good with words when it came to talking about their relationship, it was moments like this that made Thundercracker recognize that he had significantly more self-confidence than his mate. He would have to be the one to bring up the hard-to-discuss topics, the unfinished business.

"…What about him?" Jazz asked. His spark was sending out waves of unease, no matter how much he tried to hide it.

They had been relaxing in Hangar A; their humans were asleep, and the other mechs were either in recharge or working quietly in Hangar C. Thundercracker had been hoping to find some well needed
alone-time with his mate. And not for the "nooky" that Jazz was constantly referring to, annoyingly so.

"I was thinking," Thundercracker replied, not caring that Jazz was trying to shrink away from the awkward topic. "I was remembering what you said before. Or rather, what was in your spark. You have affection for him."

When they had bonded… Thundercracker had felt the remnants of an intense love for Prowl in Jazz's spark, a love similar to the one he still had for Skywarp. The love they each felt for a dead mech clung to their sparks like ghosts. The continuous exposure to this world's Prowl had made it a thousand times worse for Jazz, who had never had the closure (harsh or not) that Thundercracker had dealt with after Skywarp's demise. Thundercracker understood why the feelings remained for Jazz.

What had surprised Thundercracker was the revelation of his own feelings toward the tactician. He'd thought he liked the mech, but that moment had force him to… think about things.

"TC, no," Jazz immediately said, on the defensive yet again. He sat up a bit more to look Thundercracker in the optics. "It's not—I like him, sure, an'—bein' honest, I… I could love 'im. I could." Jazz shook his helm. "But I don't."

"Because that's not your Prowl," Thundercracker said, pointing out the obvious, a fact that they had already covered in great depth. Jazz, however, needed the reinforcement of hearing it from Thundercracker again.

"Exactly!" the saboteur said emphatically. "Me an' him never had history, ya see? It's not th' same. I'm finally gettin' that. Took forever, but that's th' truth."

Thundercracker nodded vaguely. "Hmm."

Jazz hesitated at the Seeker's behavior. "What?" he asked, a probing question over the bond going unanswered.

"Well, I was thinking…” Thundercracker gauged Jazz's reaction carefully, knowing that this was where it would become a difficult conversation. "Maybe that's the point."

"What is?" Jazz demanded, visor narrowed.

"I'm a Seeker, Jazz. Seekers come in trines, or at least we do when there are other Seekers around," Thundercracker said, gesturing at his chest. He sat up properly in order to meet Jazz's confusion with calm patience. "I would never need to take another partner, mind you, because you're more than enough." Both in good ways and bad ways.

Jazz sniffed indignantly. "Damn right I am."

"Anyway, my point is, I would not be opposed to a third partner," Thundercracker said dryly. "You, however, are not a Seeker and are not familiar with trines. I know they're possible for grounders to form, but it is likely not an option you have ever considered. The choice is entirely yours."

Thundercracker knew that trines were frequently difficult for non-Trinary mechs to understand. Seekers had always been inclined to form three-way bonds in order to function as the extreme travelers and explorers they had been designed as. During war, those bonds had been both a benefit and a hindrance; the bonds that made them even more efficient killing machines also made them more vulnerable during combat.

Thundercracker had been bonded to Skywarp for far longer than they had even known Starscream.
Although all three of them had been attracted to each other and they had chosen to form a working trine, the aerial commander had refused to form a true trine bond with them, citing the dangers of bonding as a commanding officer. They had trained hard and had learned to work together as a trine effectively. That balance had been hard-won, but the effort had been repaid with success and safety for thousands of vorn.

Jazz was not a Seeker, nor was he from a background that promoted trining among grounders. A familiar look of uncertainty flickered in his visor as he stared back at Thundercracker, trying to comprehend what he was being told.

"...I don't understand," he said, disbelieving. "Yer sayin' you want t' make a trine with him?"

Thundercracker shrugged. "I'm saying, it's possible and that I'm open to the idea."

They had the option. It might be the most bizarre trine in existence, but Thundercracker could not deny the faint attraction he had for Prowl any more than Jazz could deny the lingering sense of affection he had for any Prowl. The calm demeanor and quiet kindness that had endeared him to Thundercracker would also provide balance in their relationship.

"...why?" Jazz asked, still struggling to understand.

"I like him. He's attractive and smart. Smart enough to put up with your nonsense," Thundercracker said, honest. "Also, why the frag not?"

The panic returned slightly to Jazz's faceplates. "Because... he's..."

Thundercracker narrowed his optics. "His lover died. Your lover died. My bondmate died," he said bluntly. "Now, I have a new bondmate. My bondmate, you," he pushed Jazz slightly with his finger, "and he have no history. Literally." He stroked his hand down Jazz's arm in reassurance. "Except, of course, a fondness that could effectively become something more tangible."

Jazz tried to backpedal at the onslaught of the conversation. "Holy shit, man, why are ya pushin' this?" he asked, his metaphorical hackles raised. "Are you that determined t' get in berth with him? 'Cause ya know, ya could have just asked, I'm not gonna tie ya down—"

Thundercracker sent him a hard look. "Jazz." It was irrelevant to point out that Seekers were monogamous to their trines or singular bondmates, since Jazz liked to forget those details when he was trying to be annoying.

The agitation died in Jazz's posture as Thundercracker sent a strong thought of calm down over the bond. "...Alright. I understand what you're getting at," Jazz grumbled. He looked at the ground. "...He's just as nice as I remember, but... there. That's it." Jazz looked back up and grimaced. "I have to stop thinking about what I remember."

"Indeed." That was the only way to make this sane and relatively non-painful.

Jazz sank back a little as he seemed to consider the situation seriously for once. "Prowl's a nice guy," he said. "He appears t' have a professional crush on me, an' if I'm readin' those doorwing movements right whenever he's with you, he kinda likes you, too."

Thundercracker paused. "...Really?"

"Yup. Kinda like a schoolgirl blush. He's lucky we don't got that many mechs around who can read those door flutters," Jazz said, joking. He froze and seemed to draw back further. "...Holy shit, are we really talkin' about this?"
The Seeker smirked. "I don't see a reason why we should not."

"Yer tryin' t' make me happy, but TC..." Jazz grimaced. "Even if he's not literally my dead lover, my duplicate was his. So, he's probably gonna have issues, even more than us."

"Yes, well, that's why we have to talk to him," Thundercracker replied.

Jazz sent him a look. "Good, 'cause at th' rate you're talkin', it seemed like th' plan was t' jump 'im after his shift was over."

Thundercracker growled. "You are impossible."

Patience in these things was mandatory. The cultural differences generally made non-trine mechs wary of the concept of a trine. Praxians weren't known to form trines, or at least that's what Thundercracker had always thought. Prowl was practical, however, so it was likely he'd take the most rational approach to their suggestion.

And while this was certainly not normal... it was rational, Thundercracker decided, if the signals they were reading from all three persons involved were correct.

"I don't hate th' idea," Jazz said. He managed a smile, clearly trying for both of their sakes. "TC... I think we could be happy. Even happier than we are now."

That made Thundercracker smile back. "I could see that."

Jazz abruptly grinned shamelessly. "Besides, you'd love Prowl in th' berth," he said with a predatory wink. "He's kinky as hell."

All at once the good feelings evaporated. "JAZZ," he snarled over the saboteur's laughter.

Primus. He prayed for strength—and patience.

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Operation Seduce Prowl began the next morning. Jazz got to pick the name and Thundercracker picked the process.

Even if they were wrong about Prowl's interest in them, there was definitely tension between them that needed to be dealt with. Thundercracker could easily see the long looks Prowl sent Jazz—and him. If anything, Prowl was inspecting Thundercracker even more than he was Jazz, which was mildly amusing. Even if this amounted to nothing, Thundercracker knew they'd be better off getting the truth out in the open, not letting it fester.

The plan was simple: they told everyone that they had bonded. Rachel shrugged it off rather calmly, claiming she wasn't too surprised, but she later confided privately that she was very happy for them. Danny, Wildrider, and Bluestreak had made a fuss and congratulated them enthusiastically, while the rest of their friends had calmly told them the same. Like Danny and Barns' engagement, their family saw this as a logical next step in their life.

The reaction from the rest of NEST varied. Optimus had smiled and told them he was glad for their happiness, while Ratchet had nearly blown a fuse screaming at them for bonding before a major battle ("WERE YOU OUT OF YOUR PRIMUS-SLAGGING PIT-SPAWNED MINDS?!?"). Sideswipe and his cohorts were torn between teasing and making disgusted comments, though Thundercracker knew they were just playing it up for a joke. The human soldiers had little comprehension of mech bonds, but Lennox and Epps also congratulated them, hoping to simplify the
term with "marriage," which no one tried to correct them on. It was easier that way.

And then, of course, the information traveled all the way to their intended target: Prowl.

It was harsh. It was cruel. Even Rachel did a double take when Jazz explained it to her quietly on the side while the rumors ran wild. No one but Jazz and Thundercracker knew why they had saved Prowl for last, and that was good, in case their attempts were ill-met. Thundercracker knew that letting Prowl find out they were bonded through others was cowardly. If it had not been part of their plan, he would never have done it.

But it allowed the mech the chance to hear and accept the information, the chance to adjust to the concept and start to think about it rationally long before he was confronted with the reality. As Jazz and Thundercracker finally made their way to Hangar C to talk with him, Thundercracker hoped that Prowl would be able to think clearly about their relationship, be able to understand what they were about to suggest.

Prowl stood at the back of the hangar and did not notice them as they walked quietly toward him. He was busy reading a datapad, and his pose made it seem like he was about to reach for the one laying on top of the container unit to his left. Thundercracker felt bad about interrupting the tactician in the middle of his work; the mech probably hoped to find peace in that work while the rest of the base was gossiping about something that was hurting him deeply. He hoped the talk they planned to have would ease his pain.

"Hey Prowl!" Jazz called out loudly, making Prowl jump slightly and turn to face them. The surprise on his faceplates quickly melted into a feigned neutrality that barely hid his dread when he realized who had called to him.

Thundercracker sent his bondmate a strained glare. ::You are a monster.::

Jazz snorted. ::This was partially your idea. You get the blame, too.::

::Not for your idiocy.: Thundercracker looked down just in time to nod at the black-and-white Praxian as he warily approached. "Prowl."

"...Jazz," Prowl greeted, his voice audibly tight. He looked up at the tall Seeker standing next to Jazz. "Thundercracker."

"Been lookin' fer ya!" Jazz replied amicably, as if the tension between them wasn't there. "I take it Keller's been keepin' ya busy?"

Prowl nodded stiffly. "American politicians have perfected the ability to absorb free time, yes," he replied. He hesitated when he realized both mechs were resolutely standing in front of him. He seemed more wary than confused, however. "...Can I help you?"

Thundercracker wondered briefly if Prowl thought they were there to mock him, or rub their bond in his face. That would have been ridiculously cruel, even for Jazz.

Before he had the time to correct that assumption, or share his thoughts with Jazz, of course Jazz proceeded to make it worse. "So," the saboteur began, his optics bright, "I take it ya heard th' news."

::Smooth.: Thundercracker growled.

::Shut up, I know what I'm doin'!::

Prowl's face had remained mostly the same—politely passive with little emotion anywhere—but
even Thundercracker could tell there was disappointment in his posture. His doorwings drooped a fraction and the biggest tell was that Prowl clumsily tucked his hands behind his back. Guilt tugged at Thundercracker's spark; he certainly hoped Jazz knew what he was doing. Prowl deserved credit for remaining in control of himself, however.

"Congratulations," the black-and-white Praxian replied. His reply was strained, though Thundercracker could tell the mech meant it. "Truly. I don't think I've ever seen a couple more deserving of each other."

Thundercracker said nothing, gauging the other mech. Prowl was calm on the exterior—except for his doorwings. They were twitching visibly now. He was agitated and Thundercracker didn't have to be a Praxian to know why.

He braced himself as he saw Jazz wind up wordlessly for a confrontation. They had to figure this out, before it drove them all crazy.

For his part, he had anticipated either letting it blow over, or blow up. In the case of the latter, Thundercracker expected the three of them to confront their three-way tension spontaneously, when it became too much to hold back. He did like the tactician; he liked his humor, his looks, and more than anything, he liked that Prowl still loved Jazz. In fact, Prowl loved him enough to let him go when he thought that was the best choice for Jazz. That act spoke volumes to Thundercracker. He did like Prowl. But what it actually meant and what it would lead to… well, the jet decided to let his two companions figure that out. It was far more amusing.

"Yeah, bondin' was somethin' I kept puttin' off," Jazz said with feigned indifference. It might have worked, had he not been standing in front of the two mechs who knew him well enough to know that he was beginning a fierce teasing session. "TC was th' one who wanted it."

Prowl wilted, obviously letting his processors focus on what Jazz had just said rather than the warning signs of Jazz's mood. "I see," he said, averting his optics.

Jazz thankfully backed off a bit and smiled kindly at the other mech. "Though, I gotta admit, it ain't that different," he said. He smiled up at Thundercracker, who said nothing to contradict that statement. "Ya don't really need a bond t' understand a mech. At least that's what I've learned from this."

Unsurprisingly unsubtle. Thundercracker arched an optic ridge and Jazz just smirked back. Both looked back over at Prowl, who was staring at them with an odd mix of apprehension and a strange focus, as if they were a puzzle he had to solve.

And then, before Thundercracker could try his own more blunt way of extending their invitation to the Praxian, something changed in Prowl's expression.

"We should start over," Prowl said. He froze after he said that, clearly stunned by his own utterance. Thundercracker wasn't too surprised, having expected that sort of response, albeit not that sudden.

Perhaps Prowl had been thinking about this the way they had. Their plan had worked, then.

"Start over?" Jazz repeated. He smiled, teasing back full force. "Whaddaya mean, Prowler?"

Prowl's doorwings were twitching up and down rapidly, betraying how nervous he was. "What I mean is," he began, his voice trembling slightly, "while I acknowledge that our pasts make it impossible to continue the same relationship we had in the past, Jazz, and while I continue to feel
strong emotions for you—and now Thundercracker—perhaps it would be wise to start from a point where we can assume my presence is new and—"

Jazz grinned cheerily and leaned closer, invading Prowl’s personal space expertly. "Ya want t' date us?" he asked, encouragingly.

Thundercracker, for his part, heaved a heavy sigh and merely let Jazz have his fun. He would have preferred subtle, as always, but Jazz's brash approach would move things along much more quickly.

"D-date?" Prowl repeated, his optics huge. The word was human-only in definition and origin; it had no sense in a Cybertronian setting.

However, Thundercracker had long since adopted human-only definitions into his lifestyle, considering that he felt more Earthling than Cybertronian these days. He understood the reference, which only made it more painful to experience now.

"Yeah!" Jazz said, grinning still. He motioned with his hand. "Ya don't know me like ya knew th' other me, an' th' same goes fer me knowin' you. But that's cool, 'cause we can just do what th' humans do, an' get t' know each other by datin' first."

"...I don't follow," Prowl said, uncomprehending.

Thundercracker rumbled lowly, interrupting. "He means that until the day we—if we decide to, that is—make a trine, you court the two of us," he replied simply.

Prowl stared at him, undoubtedly going over several definitions and attempts to understand the situation. "...What an odd phrase," he said, almost accusing. His voice wavered and that made Thundercracker smirk. "I'm not sure how this can be related to human definitions. Humans mate in pairs, not triads."

"Not typically," Jazz corrected, positively gleeful. He leaned back against Thundercracker's canopy and grinned. "Whaddya say, TC? Shall we accept Mr. Prowl's advances?"

"I hate you," Thundercracker replied, slapping a hand over his faceplates. Jazz's laughter rang out, warming their bond anyway.

A trine did not form from a normal bond. He had experienced that within the Decepticon army, albeit to a lesser degree than some other trines he had witnessed. He and Skywarp had been a bonded pair before meeting Starscream. Had they been given more time and something more than just warfare to bind them... they probably would have formed a literal spark-trine. They had discussed it, and both he and Skywarp had felt that they would be able to open their bond to admit Starscream when the time came. It was rare for a bonded pair to open themselves to an extra, to adapt the relationship to accept a third party, but it had happened before.

It could happen now.

With the three of them specifically... Thundercracker was very, very interested in seeing where this would lead. It had potential. They had potential.

"I..." Prowl looked uneasy still. He stood back a little. "I do not want to intrude on what you've made. It's not my place."

"Oh, Prowler," Jazz said wistfully. He stepped closer, his visor a little bit dimmer. He grasped the other mech's arms, either keeping him standing or in one place. "Ya never intrude, an' it's not like we're against th' idea. Why not see where it leads?"
This might lead to a disaster. Trines weren't a guarantee. Thundercracker wasn't even sure how to proceed with total confidence, since two of the members were starting without a real understanding of what a trine was.

But he had faith that his connection with Jazz would be strong enough to take the emotional strain. He had faith that he would learn to care about Prowl the way Jazz practically already had. And he had faith in Prowl's patience and apparent desire to connect with them.

It might be unexpected and it could end harshly—

But Thundercracker had faith they could pull through just fine.

Prowl stared at Jazz with uncertainty for the longest time. His doorwings were still and nothing was readable on his faceplates.

After that long silence, however, Thundercracker could see a faint gleam of something in his blue optics that had not been there before.

"…That would be the logical approach," Prowl admitted, his optics trailing up to meet the Seeker's gaze.

His doorwings twitched, and even if they were an alien language for now, Thundercracker had a feeling that was a good sign.

"Indeed," he agreed with a smirk.

**End Interlude 5.**

Chapter End Notes

The final chapter is next.

A/Ns:
-At least now I can post the smut one-shot of these guys without spoilers! Keep an eye out for it haha.
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

:) It's been a wonderful ride, guys. I hope you enjoy this final segment. Don't forget to read the Afterword!

Warnings: character death, foul language, violence, disturbing imagery and discussion, religious ideological discussions, theoretical science, and original characters
Disclaimer: Transformers © Dreamworks/Hasbro. The original characters found in this story were created explicitly for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

California, United States
2010 CE

Earth was beautiful.

The New Year had come and gone. Jazz had enjoyed the small celebration that the NEST personnel had been able to arrange, though he knew it was a far cry from what it could have been if they hadn't all been so busy with new mechs to house and politics to avoid. Cheap beer had given the humans the chance to unwind and the Autobots were more than willing to join in on the frivolous holiday cheer, if only to relax themselves.

Things were changing, rapidly and for the better. Miles was now more welcomed in their group; Bluestreak seemed to have accepted the fact that Kass wanted Miles in her life. Jazz was glad Kass had finally found someone to share her affections with, and everyone else had to agree. Even Rachel had warmed up to the idea of having Miles around as additional family. Sort of.

"Has anyone seen my notebook?" she demanded as she tore up their encampment looking for the spiral-bound notepad.

"Miles was looking at it," Danny offered, pointing across the hangar where Miles and Kass had been walking away.

Jazz laughed when Rachel turned red-faced. "Are you serious?" she exclaimed. She lunged to her feet. "Yo, Uncle! Come'ere!"

Miles, despite being a little slow, was quick to notice the agitation. "I plead the Fifth!" he shouted before rushing out of sight around the hangar bay door, leaving the rest of them (minus Rachel) laughing.

The kids were incredibly optimistic about their future now, and Jazz was simply ecstatic for them. They would be given permanent resident status soon, courtesy of a very grateful United States government, with Keller's enforcement. That was one less thing Jazz had to worry about in the long run; given the amount of political strife that the Autobots were facing, their humans needed the legal protection that VISAs would give them. Most of them seemed to feel that it was uncomfortable to "settle down" as citizens of a single country, but all of them agreed that Earth was their home. And
the US was a good place to settle, where NEST and the Autobots would be able to support them.

His six mechs were aiming to apply for their own Green Cards of sorts, though it would take a few years for it to be official. While the US government was figuring out the details on how to regulate immigration of interplanetary aliens, they'd continue to support the "pro-Autobot" political agenda by aiding NEST in their round up of any remaining Decepticons. Jazz would also assist Prowl and Optimus in dealing with the political arena. He'd spent decades longer dealing with Humans than either of them, and he did have a way of charming people, most everyone agreed.

The base had expanded a lot in the last few weeks. Now that the existence of the Cybertronians was public fact, there was no reason for the NEST personnel to stay separated from their families. Most families had settled in Cold Springs, but Lennox and a few others had been given permission to move their families onto the base. Jazz had been impressed by Sarah's calm reaction to meeting giant alien robots. He didn't know if it was Ironhide's doing or not, but by her second day on base she'd already realized that Annabelle could toddle around the play area they'd created without fear of being stepped on. He liked her, and could see that Ironhide respected her, and he was glad that Lennox would finally get to spend time with his family.

There were a lot more Autobots around the base now, which was fun for many of them. Jazz was overjoyed to see so many familiar faces. It was a bit awkward to have to explain the whole he-was-actually-a-time-traveler thing, but mostly everyone was receptive toward him and the other mechs in his group. Arcee was nervous about meeting her other self and pseudo-sisters, but Bluestreak was very excited to meet his duplicate.

Thundercracker, Jazz, Wildrider, and Arcee decided to change their optics back to blue when they and Bluestreak officially re-joined the Autobot ranks. Vortex and Bluestreak kept theirs green, since Vortex was adamant he was and would remain Neutral. Ratchet was busy with repairs, so the Autobot medic First Aid volunteered to help them. Wildrider had insisted on being the first, so everyone crowded around the two nervous mechs to watch as First Aid fiddled with Wildrider's optic settings.

Wildrider was tense the whole time and when the procedure was done, he peered out at his friends. Jazz withheld a grin as he took in the newly-blue eyed mech. Wildrider's optics twitched as if he could feel the color difference.

"My optics are now blue?" he asked, sounding unsure.

"Yes," First Aid replied. He hesitated. "Are you happy with them?"

"How do I look?" Wildrider instead asked, turning to Barns and Danny, a very serious expression on his face.

Barns nodded vaguely, but Danny smiled cheerfully. "You don't look like Christmas anymore!" she said.

Wildrider scowled. "No, now I look stupid," he complained. "Red, blue, and black, this is stupid."

"Your face was always stupid," Vortex replied all-too-pleasantly for the typically serious mech. Wildrider snarled, but the others laughed it off.

They were all more upbeat since the death of the Fallen and the end of the war; even the most grim members of their group had been affected. Jazz had been thrilled to see Arcee and Vortex laughing and joking with the others far more often this past week than ever before. He himself was walking on clouds.
Prowl, Optimus and Keller had taken him and Thundercracker aside for a long talk earlier that week. They'd explained the colony situation and how it applied to their family. Jazz had been happy to learn that those who didn't want to stay on Earth would have a home to go to.

But then Optimus, smiling gently like he always did, dropped the bigger bombshell.

"When the Autobot forces stationed on Earth transfer to the colony permanently, NEST will move their personnel to other bases and leave this one to the state," Optimus explained. "The majority of the land will revert to the state park's control, but a large part of the base, including the airfield and the hangars, will remain in the possession of the federal government."

"The Feds have no interest in maintaining an old base like this, and will likely sell it or maybe donate it to a local interest," Keller added. "We'd like to give first right of refusal to you and your companions."

Jazz had gaped uncomprehendingly. That… that meant…

"You're… giving us the base?" Thundercracker finally asked for him, stunned.

"In time, you will have the opportunity to purchase the land," Prowl corrected, matter-of-fact as always. He did smile, however, with a particular fondness directed at them. "Considering the ample sum NEST will be paying you and your comrades as citizens of this country who will be working as agents for NEST, you will certainly be able to afford the state-sanctioned price."

They were going to have a home? NEST was going to give them the base, and essentially pay them to take it. Jazz was almost too stunned to pay attention to Prowl's next comment about how the Ark would also play a role in the base's future.

"To make room for the additional Autobot forces being rotated on and off planet as the colony is constructed and the search for Decepticons who continue the war, the Ark will be parked adjacent to the hangars that currently exist here," Prowl explained. "The shuttle will remain here for future Autobot visits when needed, which will be part of the agreement of you owning the property, but between those times, the shuttle will be yours to use as housing."

Keller snorted. "Congress is already having a fit over having the ship down here, but hey, your presentation sold most of them anyway," he said. He nodded to Jazz and Thundercracker. "It's not much, but it'll give y'all something solid to hold onto. You're gonna need a place to hide once your group makes it into the mainstream news."

Jazz barely remembered to thank them and almost couldn't explain the news to their crew later that night. It was so much to take in, but once it did sink in, their excitement was incredible.

"We're going to have a house!" Bluestreak exclaimed as Wildrider high-fived Vortex behind him. "One we can all fit into!"

"How much of the forest do we get?" Rachel asked, eyes bright.

"Do we have to pay electricity bills?" Barns asked, gazing around with a concentrated expression at all the lights.

Danny laughed and hugged him. "Who cares? ! We're gonna have a house!"

Jazz had laughed and felt giddy as he watched his family celebrate. Everything was happening so fast and seemed so permanent—but for once, that didn't scare him. It felt right.
Prowl was warming up to him and Thundercracker, his family was making long-term plans for a better life, and they were finally beginning to heal. Jazz had never been happier.

The world, on the other hand, was coming along a bit more slowly than they were in terms of closure. Governments from all over were trying to organize meet-and-greets with Prime and there was still the monumental task of wooing the mass media to like them. Then, of course, there was the aftermath of the actual fighting to deal with.

There was a memorial planned; actually two were. One would be in Wiesbaden and the other in Los Angeles. Jazz didn't know the details of what they'd look like, but he was sure they'd be nice. Earth was still healing from recent events, but humans certainly did a good job honoring their dead. It was an added bonus that the memorials would honor fallen Autobots as well.

It was unexpected, then, when Prowl slipped up beside him one afternoon. The closeness was new, but the gentle gesture that followed was not.

"You may want to take your team out to the archery range," Prowl said. He nodded to Thundercracker before walking away, leaving them wondering what it was. Optimus, waiting for Prowl at the door, nodded to both mechs knowingly, which added to their confusion.

Jazz realized that whatever this was, it was important, so he rounded up their ten. The kids were still excited over the idea of having their own rooms on a stranger-free base, so they took the lead. Apparently they and Wildrider knew where the archery range was and had no trouble leading the rest of them through the forest. Jazz was amused and strolled behind their rowdy family hand in hand with Thundercracker.

He was happy to see Arcee and Wildrider bickering, Wildrider playfully throwing snow at the femme, who only dodged his shot and laughed back at him.

Yes, things were getting so much better.

Jazz skipped down the last slope in the trail, laughing at Thundercracker's bemusement and almost twirling as he moved. Everything felt lighter, like the air had been shaken out and replaced with new —

"Guys?" Danny called from further ahead. She sounded alarmed, which made Jazz and Thundercracker stop short. "What is…?"

There were only a few trees between them and where the others had stopped. Jazz stepped forward and saw Wildrider and the humans standing in front of a large dark stone that seemed far too polished and centered to be natural. His optics found sunken, golden text in the stone's surface and his spark skipped.

With your choices and your risks
You gave us life, you gave us this
   New world to treasure,
   New lives to build
   From your sacrifices
   Now fulfilled.

Dear lost ones,
You will never be gone.
A brighter world has now begun,
   and in our hearts, you live on.
Thank you.

"...That's my poem," Rachel said, shattering the stunned silence. She stepped forward, eyes huge. "H-how...?"

Bluestreak was gawking at the stone. "Maybe Miles gave it to them?" he suggested, voice wavering, his doorwings moving a mile a minute.

If that were true... Jazz couldn't find the strength to say it out loud. NEST had... done this? For them?

"Prowl did this?" Thundercracker asked, optics wide. Images and emotions attached to that suggestion surged over the bond.

"I think it was all th' Autobots and NEST," Jazz replied shakily. He moved to the side stiffly as Vortex inched closer in stunned silence. "Wow."

Danny looked unsure whether or not to be upset or moved. "...Wow," she repeated.

They had made them their own memorial plaque. Jazz found himself increasingly overwhelmed as he realized what NEST had given them. A new home, a place of peace... and now, a way to grieve on their own terms, without the pressure of a public space.

He needed to thank them in private. Never would Jazz ever doubt that Prime, or Prowl, were truly great mechs.

Below, the humans shuffled awkwardly on their feet. Kass looked back at the mechs and her eyes were dark with emotion.

"...I don't know what to say," she admitted quietly.

Barns exchanged a look with Arcee and collected himself first. "Thank you, perhaps, like the poem says," he said. He looked around their group and motioned toward the stone monument. "Goddard... our parents, families... Wheeljack... Their sacrifices got us here."

Vortex knelt down next to Rachel. "Hmm."

"And all those who perished here, in this world," Barns continued. He stared at the statue with shining eyes, despite the smile on his face now. "So many have suffered and died, and we are the ones to benefit. We owe them so much."

Arcee nodded and rolled closer in order to kneel on the other side of him. "Yes," she said softly. Wildrider whined and sank down lower as well.

They all had their turn to quietly stand in front of the tiny monument and say silent prayers or gratitude. Rachel left first, clearly fighting her feelings, and Vortex thankfully went with her. Slowly, the others got up to leave, eyes and optics lingering on the words longer than was necessary to memorize them.

He waited until he was the last one and only moved forward when he knew the others were walking back up the trail to the base. He knew he could come back and have a quiet moment alone to reflect later, but Jazz could not stop himself from taking the chance right then.

There weren't any names on the stone, but Jazz envisioned all of their lost companions, including the children's parents, siblings, and guardians. He remembered Goddard's loud laugh and Wheeljack's
quiet chuckle; he remembered his Prowl's gentle consideration, his Ironhide's solid strength and his Mikaela's stubborn grit. He remembered them as they were in life—and he remembered why he was so utterly grateful to have known them all.

"...Thank you, guys," he said. He let his fingers trace over the top of the rock to the edge and he let them drop. The stone remained bold and strong; it would last for a long time there.

He wasn't sure if he was sad or relieved to leave the clearing and wander back up the trail toward the base. It was like a part of their past was now wrapped up in that one stone. They'd never forget, Jazz knew, but... it was almost a relief to be able to keep the darker feelings at bay, and instead focus on the good that had grown from that misery.

Jazz saw Thundercracker's back first as he climbed back up to the base. The others were recovering from their moment of remembrance, and Jazz smiled when he heard their laughter ring out again. Every little bit of healing helped, he knew. They would be okay.

Wildrider, fully healed, was picking on Vortex and the two pushed each other around in what they knew as play. Arcee complained and squawked when Wildrider grabbed hold of her and swung her around. That sent the humans and Bluestreak laughing. Jazz heard Thundercracker chuckle and saw him shake his head in amusement with the base as their backdrop.

Staring at the sight, Jazz was hit with the truth, and it almost made him stumble on the tarmac.

In a few years, this would be theirs; what was already their home in spirit would be their home in truth. The Ark would be added to the base; the soldiers would move away and all that would be left was their family. No one else could lay claim to it. It was theirs. That seemed so impossible.

Jazz found himself standing still, absorbing the entirety of that concept, watching his friends, hearing the sounds of their laughter and conversation, and recognizing that the absence of immediate and inescapable death cemented that formerly impossible dream into reality.

"Jazz?"

He turned and saw Thundercracker waiting for him, watching with mild concern. Jazz stared back and realized he must have seemed lost in thought.

"I'm good," he said. He paused and then smiled. "We're all good."

Their hands found each other and Jazz found himself looking up.

He gazed up at the blue sky, the tree line, the far off dancing birds, and slowly came back down to watch his family live and thrive together as they walked on toward a future they had sorely won and deserved at long, long last.

Jazz smiled against the surge of joy in his spark.

Earth was theirs—

And it was home.

The End.
Please look up the song "Dog Days Are Over" by Florence and the Machine for a song to wrap this story up. ;)
Onto the Afterword…

A/Ns:
-There is a reason why Bluestreak kept his optics green. You'll find out in Fallout: Adaptions.
-I also get to bombard you with a ridiculous amount of political chaos in Adaptions too, so you get to find out how the colony reaches reality, too. Warning: I love political chaos.
Hello, my dears!

After over two years of writing and posting, we've come to the end of *Fallout* and its sequel *Fallout: Apocalypse*. It's been a crazy ride. I cannot thank you enough, all of you readers and reviewers, for your viewership and comments that have helped to guide this story forward. I have learned more about myself as a writer writing this story than I have with ANY other piece I've worked on, original or not. I especially thank my wonderful beta, Shantastic, for her outstanding job keeping these stories from capsizing and for making them as great as they are now. Seriously, she deserves a medal for this!

Some of you asked if this was indeed the end of our rag-tag group of heroes. I've put a lot of thought into this and *I've decided that Apocalypse will be the last solid fiction for the Fallout universe.*

However, fear not! I have plenty of little short stories (more similar to the style of the original *Fallout*) and I will most likely be working on them from time to time, posting them under the title, *Fallout: Adaptions*. You've already seen a few Fallout-era chapters there. *More chapters now will center on the aftermath of Apocalypse* and just what our heroes are up to after the end of the end of the world. *However, it will not be a frequent thing for me,* as I have some other projects in line to be worked on, but do expect updates for *Adaptions* on occasion. :) I would miss these darlings too much to not write further pieces about them!

That said, I'm sure you're wondering, "What now?" I wondered that too, and for the last few weeks, I've had some difficult thinking to do. I have both good and bad news as a result.

The bad news is simple: *I'm postponing starting any new fan fictions, including Transformers, for the next year*. I still have a few fics left to finish up, but for the next year, I'm abstaining from new fics, including my (baby) next big *Transformers* fic, *War Slayer*. Someday, that will be online, but not any time soon. I will still work on *Fallout: Adaptions* of course, but that will be about it.

The good news is a bit complex and bit more personal. I've evaluated my life goals very thoroughly over the last few weeks and I've realized that I truly want to take a shot at writing professionally for a living. *Fallout* has taught me perseverance and patience, which has helped me in my "professional" works tremendously. For the entire year I'm not working on fics, I plan on finishing and polishing up my novel, and getting it to an agent. There are no guarantees in the publishing world, but I want to try it. Writing makes me happy in a way no other hobby (or career) ever will.

I will also be working on an online graphic novel series titled *The Septenary*. It will hopefully be up within the next two years, so you can keep an eye out for it, too.

I know this is somewhat selfish, since I have promised other fanfiction after *Fallout* was done, but I had to make a choice for what would be best for my future. Maybe I can succeed, or maybe not, but who knows! :) I have hope.

You can keep track of this year long progress on my update twitter at nan00kwrites. You can also check out my *livejournal* at nan00kwrites for the same reason. If I start up another fic this time next year, you'll find out on there first!

Until I update more *Fallout: Adaptions* or upload a new *Transformers* fan fiction, I bid you a fond farewell! Wish me luck.
Seriously, thank you so much again for your support! Especially you, Shantastic! You guys have no idea how much it has meant for me this whole time. You're the greatest!

Much love,
Nan00k

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