TRANSFORMERS TIMELINES PRESENTS:

FOUNDATION AND WRECKAGE

PART 1: DEADLY AIM

A TALE FROM OF MASTERS AND MAYHEM

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PROLOGUE

The radio frequencies that Alpha Bravo had been monitoring blared to life. They were filled with excited voices describing a meteor falling from the galaxy above and ready to crash to the ground below. He however knew that this was not a meteor. The roar and scream of distressed Cybertronian engines met his ears like the jovial, bouncing sub-sonic jingle of the Cosmic Carnival.

Normally the undercover Autobot would wait for the hangar to clear out of personnel before he activated his holo-driver program. He had incorporated himself into the emergency rescue team flawlessly and didn't want to risk drawing any unwanted attention – like the burst of light as the projector initiated, or there suddenly being two junior lieutenants with the same face. This time, however, he activated the subroutine and the image of one of the rescuers appeared at his flight controls. She was spectral at first, then gained a more solid look in a few fractions of a second. The hologram quickly surveyed the hangar, no one seemed to have noticed her appear from out of nowhere. Good. She then turned over the engine – or rather Alpha Bravo turned over his engine while she imitated the motion.

As he flew over the city and towards the crash site, his mind danced at the prospect of meeting another survivor. It had been years since he even thought of his homeworld and even longer since he had accepted the fact that he was the last of his kind. A fact which was apparently now ready to be disproved.

The ship was more of a pod really. Small and suited for a single pilot. It had crashed in the middle of an open field. A flornseed field to be precise, so the dirt had been tilled time and again until it was loose and soft. Convenient for a crash landing… Had the pod not managed to collide with the one solidary boulder that stood over the field, a monolith of a guardian. Parts of the pod were strewn in every direction… with no signs of an occupant. Did the pilot eject? Did she/he manage to walk away from the crash? Was there never a pilot in the first place? That last possibility certainly would explain the crash landing.

Alpha Bravo landed and converted into robot mode; helicopter blades retracted and the vehicle's canopy split to form slender legs. His brilliant white armor glowed orange from the fires surrounding him. Something on the edge of the field caught his eye. It was dark, black or perhaps gray, with spots of blue and red. And a very bright green face. A very bright green *robot* face. Alpha Bravo swore he felt his energon pump sputter. It was another Cybertronian.

"Love. Love will keep us together."

The majority of the assembled robots groaned in response. Alpha Bravo and Offroad had been serving as defense vehicles for a security force on Abraxas when Impactor and the new Wreckers team approached them with an offer – join the Wreckers and bring justice to those that created the Cybertronians' exile from their home planet. Feigning – Alpha Bravo knew he was only pretending – boredom at the pretense of blending into Abraxan society as a thoughtless, brainless machine, Offroad was quick to agree. Alpha Bravo, who didn't mind working alongside the smaller beings, was slower to reciprocate but ultimately craved the acceptance of the remnants of his species. That was, after all, why he had partnered with a Decepticon in the first place, despite Offroad's constant misunderstanding of the arrangement.

"I know you're eager to come across as a team player, but... We're Wreckers now. Maybe run something like that by me first before you say it next time." Offroad's scowl caused Toxitron to chuckle. Even after months of being a Wrecker, the wheezing noise of rending metal that the bright green and purple robot emitted as laughter still unnerved his teammates.

Behind his visor, Alpha Bravo rolled his eyes. "Well no, it doesn't have to be 'love' exactly. But some kind of emotion that we can all get behind. That we can all share in while in combined mode. Something that strengthens our mental bond and makes it unbreakable."

"Like hatred. Anger. The thirst for revenge..." Impactor's voice trailed off as he looked up to see the Wreckers staring at him. "What? It's why you're all here. By the infernos of the Pit, even Toxitron got it when we recruited him; none of us are nice guys here. We're here to set things right, regardless of the mess we have to make to do so."

"The mess is why I joined." Toxitron cackled like the rattle of rusted chains, perhaps to cover his lie. Revenge was absolutely a large part of his motivation, but it was being asked to be part of a team that swayed him. It was entirely new to him. It tugged at some part of him that he never knew he had. For further obscuration, he quickly followed with, "It's been too long since I boiled the metal off of a robot."

Alpha Bravo shifted nervously at the thought of the horrors each of his new teammates must have been part of during the war. Even during the last skirmishes as the Mayhem Attack Squad tore through the final barricades around Kaon and descended on the city populated by Decepticon and Autobot refugees alike, Alpha Bravo was only a rookie. His combat experiences surmounted to logistics and supply runs to refresh the troops on the front lines. The only time he actually held a pulse rifle was when it was safely housed inside of a trildarium shipping crate. A grin widened on Offroad's face as he took notice of Alpha Bravo's discomfort. He pointed his thumb over his shoulder and back at the white and orange Autobot.

"I don't think this one can muster anything close to hate. He's still practically case fresh!"

"You don't seem all that seasoned yourself...." Counterpunch's voice trailed off.

Ignoring the playful tension now beginning to fill the room, Fractyl spoke up in a meaningful tone. He pointed deliberately into the three-dimensional layered digital display of the data tablet in his hand. "It's not emotion that makes the Mayhem Attack Squad unstoppable as Thunder Mayhem."

"He's right. Superion, Defensor, even Bruticus and Menasor, none of them could stand up to Mayhem. And emotion was certainly not something that they lacked. They even had a unifying will to stay ALIVE." Counterpunch's remark caused Impactor's chin to drop towards his chest. He was there for the fight between Thunder Mayhem and Superion. Although he felt disingenuous labeling it a "fight" – Bolstered by Wheeljack's latest upgraded weaponry and Powerglide's new Targetmaster mode, Superion had managed a surprise attack against Thunder Mayhem but his barrage of firepower did nothing to slow down his rival. Thunder Mayhem withstood every volt, all without flinching. When Superion had emptied his batteries, he froze. He couldn't understand how his attack had failed to penetrate Thunder Mayhem's armor. No one watching could understand. Although it was, unfortunately, all too easy to accept what came next. Twin swords in hand, Thunder Mayhem quartered Superion with just a flick of his wrists, and then bisected each of the resulting husks to ensure that each of the Aerialbots was extinguished. It was swift, clean, but still one of the most brutal things that Impactor had witnessed.

Gloom replaced Alpha Bravo's discomfort. He was still in training during the encounter between Superion and Thunder Mayhem, so therefore did not witness the final events himself. However, he had received a detailed recollection of the events, complete with a vid recording. He wasn't alone in receiving such a report; Offroad opened his stored memories and played back the message he had received when Menasor had been quite literally torn apart by Thunder Mayhem's massive, combined laser cannon. The gray and blue Decepticon fought to keep the confident smile on his face so as to not betray his tenebrous feelings to the other Wreckers.

"One of life's true ironies. You fight to stay alive but then you're still killed by a mass murderer. It makes you laugh, you know?" Toxitron emphasized his joke by simulating snuffing out a life with his thumb rubbing against the cargo hold wall. The orange ooze on the digit burned into the bulkhead, emitting a puff of smoke in the air. It added a flair of drama that Toxitron hadn't intended.

Fractyl remained deaf to the tone of the room as he returned to his data tablet. "Yes, well, like I said it's not emotion or mental homogeneity that has made Thunder Mayhem the ultimate gestalt that he is. Rather, it's all entirely physical. And explainable."

"And replicable?" Counterpunch interjected.

"Possibly. In a way." Fractyl's eyes rose from the tablet. "Shockwave added something to the combined mode. We all know that Combiners technically have SIX personalities – or, technically, n+1, n being the number of individual components – as the identity of the combiner forms from fragments of the individuals. That's not how Thunder Mayhem works though. His sixth personality isn't derivative, it's distinct. It has its own spark..."

"It... what? How do you know all this?" Impactor took a step towards Fractyl, curiosity edging him forward.

"I used to know an information thief. Data Pack. Data Rat. Something that. He was part of a ring obsessed with breaking Shockwave's firewalls, so what I remember from his digital heists was more than useful breaking the encryption on those files we lifted from the lab where we found our oozy friend over there." Fractyl nodded to Toxitron then tapped at the data tablet to bring up a new file. "But hold on. That's not even all yet. I'm sure we all took notice that our self-same friend, himself of course a Shockwave experiment, resembles Optimus Prime..."

"Does he? I guess if you squint a little..." Offroad half-closed his eyes.

"I... I thought it was just one of those faces. I don't know how many times I've been compared to other Transformers..." Alpha Bravo's voice squeaked out as he still tried to recover from somber thoughts.

"Yes. He does." Fractyl continued with a dismissive tone. "And it appears that Shockwave, or at least Shockwave's subordinates, had at one time used Toxitron to grow a Matrix shell. Not a full Matrix, Pit, could you imagine the Decepticons with a Creation Matrix? It would be Jetfire all over again… But without the faction-swapping part… * Ahem * Anyway, this was just the shell, you might be able to guess where I'm going with this."

From the far side of the room, Toxitron's gaze burned but the robot remained silent. The anger seething from him was almost palpable among the other Wreckers, who chose to share in the quiet.

"No takers? Okay... The Matrix shell is where Shockwave imbued the sixth spark. Apparently it was from a power-craving Decepticon who thought of himself as a scientist. Anyone ever hear of Thunderwing?"

Counterpunch rubbed the back of his head. "Uhm... Fractyl. *Thunder* Mayhem."

"Oh! Right. I guess that's... pretty obvious... now." Fractyl retrieved an image of Thunderwing and projected a perfectly three dimensional recreation of the robot from the information pad. "Thunderwing was of an ambitious sort. A scientist and a dreamer. And by 'dreamer' I mean abso-fragging-lutely power hungering insane. He even experimented on his own exostructure as well as, I scrap you not, his spark to try to unlock some kind of primordial secrets that he thought lay deep in our CNA. He of course didn't find a thing, but the experiments did alter him. Turned his spark... green."

"Green? Smelt me..." Counterpunch's mouth hung wide open. The rest of the Wreckers in the cargo hold shared similar disbelief. Except for Alpha Bravo, he had no idea what any of that meant but so as to not be left out, nodded knowingly.

"Ah okay so now it all makes sense. That's where Needlenose got involved, as custom color coordinator." Offroad playfully slapped Alpha Bravo across the back of the head to which the Autobot responded with a jocular shove. Offroad smirked and was just about to shove him back when he noticed that Fractyl was staring at him disapprovingly. The way a parent would just before scolding a naughty child.

"AHEM."

Instead of shoving Alpha Bravo, Offroad wrapped one arm around the white robot. With an open palm on the other the Decepticon motioned to Fractyl. "Sorry prof. You were onto something?"

"Shockwave became aware of Thunderwing's new spark and envied him. Not for the untold power the spark gave, but for the sheer scientific curiosity. So he had Thunderwing captured, thrown in a cell and his spark removed." Fractyl glanced over to Impactor. "The story is A LOT longer than that, but since Shockwave apparently liked to see his own words, I'll spare the crew the monotony of the endeavor."

"Good call. I'm already bored enough that I'm imagining how a Predacon's voice would sound as I melted away his lower jaw." Toxitron's stare was enough to make even Impactor shudder. Although the green robot didn't technically have a mouth, his face then opened just above the plate where a mouth should be, it was his estimation of a smile.

"I'm joking! I already know what that sounds like."

"You said that it was replicable. How do we recreate a green spark?" Counterpunch cocked his head. Fractyl couldn't tell if the spy was challenging him or honestly hoped that Fractyl had a way to build an a near-inextinguishable spark. Preposterous.

"We don't. At least not the 'spark' part. But you met Gnash, Counterpunch. Impactor. Tell me she didn't blow your energy sensors." Fractyl's eyes darted from Counterpunch to Impactor.

"The greenergon." The corner of Impactor's mouth twitched. It was though it was trying to break through the frown that seemed permanently sculpted on his face and into a smile.

"Exactly. It mimics the energy outputs that Shockwave recorded from Thunderwing's spark. We-"

Impactor interrupted Fractyl "We have a shot."

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Offroad's tires squealed as he sped around the corner. The vehicle which he had scanned as a disguise had soft treads with too much grip. The Decepticon couldn't work out how anyone could drive on tires like that. As soon as he could do so without detection, he shed the clunky, grabby wheels and found a set made from harder material that were practically worn smooth. Now even on these streets made from ground stone and hardened tar, he felt like he was back on Cybertron's metal roadways. The grace, the maneuverability, the slide… He wished he could scream from the exhilaration but Junior Lieutenant Feenliess was seated in the driver's seat, hands on the steering wheel as though she were actually doing the driving. Offroad let her keep thinking that. With Lt. Feenliess that was easy; both she and Offroad seemed to have the same hot head and lead foot.

"What's your ETA, Offroad? Things are getting out of control up here!" Alpha Bravo's voice was being beamed straight into Offroad's internal receptors. No one but the Decepticon could hear him.

"I thought you were eager to prove yourself, Alpha." Offroad beamed back. "I saw your data hacks that kept putting you on the front line for every mission. Since when would the squad even need a helicopter for child birth?"

"She could have been stranded in the wilderness somewhere. You don't know."

"The address was in the file. It was five blocks from the hospital." Offroad darted to the left to avoid a pothole large enough to snap his axle. Feenliess didn't see it but credited her thundercougar-like reflexes anyway. Through his interior cameras Offroad could see the Lieutenant mouth the words, "Nailed it!"

"Well…Abraxans have VERY complex biologies. Time was urgent! Like it is now!" Offroad could detect the panic in his friend's voice and pulled the accelerator down farther. Feenliess didn't even seem to notice.

"Everything is still pretty much moving in the one direction though…" Offroad's truck mode skidded to a stop when the Lieutenant stomped on the brake pedal. He wanted to get closer, but Feenliess grabbed her gear and ran out to greet the other rescuers. The Decepticon cursed to himself; he wouldn't be able to help from this distance.

The fire was intense, burning at temperatures that rivaled some Cybertronian laser blasters. Okay, training blasters. For the Abraxans, however, it would be deadly to get within even thirty meters of the blaze. They formed a perimeter and turned on their hose trucks. What water made it to the building had little effect.

And why should it? The building on fire was a chemical manufacturing plant dedicated to producing a fuel additive designed to burn cleaner and produce fewer toxic emissions that harmed the environment. It was, however, highly combustible on its own. Which may be the reason that the surly robophobic bartender – J'oh, was it? – who Offroad encountered in the Black Hole Bar And Grill used it to make his famous Abraxan Blue Lava Fireball drinks – it provided a spectacular show and any residue from the chemical was burned away, leaving a (relatively) safe drink for organics in the bar. Or so the bartender claimed.

Offroad caught sight of Alpha Bravo. The white helicopter was hovering over the blaze with a dangling bucket full of water which he released into the heart of the fire. Unfortunately, it had the same disappointing outcome as the hoses outside.

"Alpha, I need to get in there. I need to get closer. I can't do a thing out here." Offroad beamed his message to the Autobot's internal communications. He encrypted the frequency anyway in case Alpha Bravo's "pilot", the now Captain Jorrval, would accidentally pick it up on her modified satellite radio. No doubt she now had it scanning all channels to coordinate the joint effort. "Can you provide a distraction?"

"All these 'distractions' I have to make for you," Alpha Bravo complained in his beam, "They're going to think my rotors are faulty!"

Just then one of the vats of chemicals must have burst into flame. A spiraling, fiery vortex shot through the roof of the building and into the sky. Offroad lost sight of Alpha Bravo behind the tower of blue flames and smoke.

"ALPHA!!" Offroad's panic riddled his beam with static. He almost involuntarily transformed into robot mode right there behind the fire squad, who stood transfixed on the blistering blue tornado that seemed to swallow a rescue chopper.

"Uhhhh… You said you wanted a distraction. Consider this it!" Alpha Bravo emerged from the flames, singed and damaged, adding his own wobble to the rotors to make sure he had the attention from everyone on the ground.

His wheeled compatriot did as he was told and took advantage of the drama in the sky to release his brakes and roll down away from the rescue squad. When convinced he was out of ear shot, he started his engine and revved towards the far side of the chemical plant.

After a quick glance to make sure no one was on this side of the building, Offroad delivered a burst of energon to his engine and charged through the loading dock doors. The thin metal barriers buckled to his hardened Cybertronian armor in an instant. He sped into what appeared to be warehouse that stored the ingredients for the fuel additive's recipe. Mangham, renastum, flantianite, thorrinault… That last one sounded familiar. Maybe he heard about it from a global news burst? He didn't have time to remember; he had started to convert into his robot mode when he heard a muffled cough. There on the opposite side of the warehouse, behind a freezer door.

No way anyone could survive these temperatures, Offroad thought, *not even in there.*

Navigating the aisles of the warehouse on four wheels instead of two legs proved difficult. Exceedingly difficult as the heat from the fire melted the tires from his rims. Metal now grinding on metal, Offroad nonetheless edged his way towards the fridge. And once again he heard the cough. He was sure of it now, some one was alive in there.

With a single subconscious command, Offroad's energy ax whirred free from its hidden compartment. He locked his front brakes and spun the rear end of his truck mode, so that the controlled corkscrew allowed the ax to make purchase with the freezer door. Four Abraxan scientists were huddled inside and suddenly now faced the broiling temperatures of the warehouse around them. Offroad, finishing his spin, stopped just inches from the freezer and opened his driver's side door for the Abraxans to crawl in. He cranked his air conditioning to maximum and drove his gas pedal to the floor causing his metal rims to grind and whine as they tried to make some kind of friction with the super-heated metal plating of the warehouse floor. *Now is when I could really use those other tires…*

The rims finally gained enough traction to propel the truck forward and halfway across the warehouse space, Offroad released a plume of exhaust. His straining engines complained and convulsed and they sucked at Offroad's energon reserves. White smoke belched from four separate mufflers underneath his rear fender and, as the smoke rose throughout the warehouse, its carbon monoxide bound with loose oxygen molecules in the air. The fire lapped and twisted, trying grasp the oxygen while it was still available, but soon the blue flames were coughing and gasping. And dying as they were starved and suffocated. Offroad glanced back as he neared the warehouse door, the same one he had already previously smashed through. He was confident that Alpha Bravo's water bucket could douse the rest.

When his panic stricken and heat struck passengers finally began to regain awareness of what just happened, Offroad had already initiated a hologram of Lt. Feenliess and placed her behind the steering wheel. He did his best to simulate the Junior Lieutenant's boisterous voice, "Are you folks alright?"

All four passengers nodded and somewhere inside his truck mode, Offroad smiled.

It took several more hours to get the fire under control, but it was eventually extinguished. The rescue crew was replaced by investigators and insurance adjusters, and the rescue vehicles and equipment were driven back to the station house. His rotors overheated and his paint blistering, Alpha Bravo shut down his sensors and embraced the cold, soapy water with which Captain Jorrval sprayed him. It was soothing, almost relaxing. The Captain had been flying with Alpha Bravo since she herself was a junior lieutenant, so she knew all the nooks and crevices of Alpha Bravo's helicopter mode.

Lieutenant Feenliess had Offroad up on the rack, replacing the melted tires and wondering how "her truck" had gotten so ashen. "I really have no idea how this happened. I thought I parked far enough away…"

"It probably was caught in the same updraft as my chopper. There's no predicting fires sometimes." Jorrval scrubbed the last of the smoke and ash from Alpha Bravo's white armor. Feenliess accepted the Captain's explanation and lowered the lift. Offroad's new tires bounced as they hit the ground. His new, underinflated and thick treaded tires. He laughed inwardly.

"Come on, LT. Why don't we go relax and have a drink?" The taller Jorrval put her hand on Feenliess' shoulder as the pair walked from the station's garage. "I think we deserve it after today."

"Sure… Just not the Fireballs again." Feenliess tilted her head and laid it against Jorrval's shoulder.

The Captain chortled. "You got it."

As the Abraxans' steps faded away, Offroad converted into robot mode and sat on the lift. Alpha Bravo transformed as well and walked over to the Decepticon. Offroad looked himself over, noticing he was still covered in soot. "Oh sure… You get a bath."

"Hey, c'mon. You got these new wheels…" Alpha Bravo poked at the tire on Offroad's leg and then spun it.

Offroad swatted the Autobot's hand away and stopped the tire. He then inspected it with a playful grimace on his face. "I miss my old ones."

Alpha Bravo punched Offroad in the shoulder. The Decepticon cradled his arm pretending that it hurt. "You'll get used to them."

"Yeah, I suppose." Offroad smiled as he rubbed his knuckles across the top of Alpha Bravo's helmet. "After all, I got used to you."

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Toxitron didn't trust scientists. Given his history with them, he had no reason to trust them. Not even geochemists. So of course he was in Fracyl's makeshift laboratory as the Predacon was extracting a sample from one of the green crystals that he had acquired on Chicxulania, keeping a wary eye on the procedure. At first it didn't bother Fractyl, he was adept at ignoring other people in the room when he was at the cusp of a breakthrough.

However, Toxitron was becoming difficult to ignore. "What is this going to prove, hmm? This tiny little piece of crystal? It's nothing. It's pretty. I hate it already."

Fractyl, energy scalpel in hand, hunched over the table. He gritted his teeth to fight the urge to push Toxitron away. An action he knew would, despite his Furmanite armor, cause himself significant pain as Toxitron's ooze burned his casings. "I'm going to combine this 'tiny' crystal with the sample of your fluids that I took. Given your similarities to Optimus Prime, the greenergon should react with them in the same way that the Thunderwing spark interacts with your Matrix shell."

"Thunderwing. Thunder Mayhem. Shockwave's 'perfect' experiment! Beautiful! Shining! Gorgeous! Leaving all of the rest of us ugly ones forgotten and discarded!" Fractyl turned his head to see Toxitron's fists quivering as the robot was working himself up into some kind of tantrum.

"He wanted monsters. He made us monsters. We BECAME monsters! Monsters have no rights; they can be locked away when not needed. Spat on. Mocked. Taunted… But… But… Monsters have no rules either. They simply destroy… And they learn to ENJOY it!!!" Toxitron's not-mouth face-hole opened wide as the robot roared in anger.

Startled, Fractyl flinched. The energy scalpel skipped through the greenergon crystal and the sample piece bounced

across the table. It rattled between beakers, burners, and test tubes until against all odds it landed inside of a beaker with a splash. The crystal dissolved into the clear liquid, turning it a murky emerald. Then it started bubbling. Boiling. So violent did the chemical reaction become that soon the liquid was churning into a frothing, foamy mess threatening to surge from the mouth of the container.

Aware of what was happening, Fractyl grabbed the beaker and hurled it out into the hallway. Alpha Bravo saw the beaker fly past and land next to Offroad as the two were walking towards the command deck. The Autobot managed to pull Offroad out of the way as the beaker suddenly exploded in orange red flames and knocked the door to the cargo hold off of its hinges. When the ringing in Fractyl's ears stopped, all he could hear was Toxitron's metallic laughter… He wished for the ringing to return.

"Are you alright?" Alpha Bravo looked him over, running his hands along Offroad's plating and searching for any wounds.

Offroad held his head. "Uhhh… I think so?"

Alpha Bravo didn't seem to hear him and in his concern checked Offroad over a second time, his fingers feeling for anything unfamiliar. Offroad brushed Alpha Bravo aside hastily when Impactor rounded the corner, alerted by the sound of the explosion.

"I said I was fine." The Decepticon turned back to the white and orange Autobot with a thankful smile before addressing the Wrecker commander. "What is it, Impactor… er… sir? What happened?"

"How should I know?" Impactor spotted Toxitron and Fractyl in the lab. "Somebody report!"

"It looks like the scientist's miracle crystals don't play well with my mech fluids after all…" Toxitron snickered. It sounded like a vapor rat caught between two thermo-cogs.

"Fractyl, is that-?" Impactor started before Fractyl cut him off.

"No." Fractyl mocked brushing himself off. "No, that's not what happened. That wasn't Toxitron's mech fluid. That was plain, ordinary thiotimoline. A usually innocuous solvent."

Toxitron scowled, disappointed that he wasn't responsible for the chaos that just happened.

Counterpunch rushed into the lab next. "Didn't anyone tell you lot that the war was over? I-"

"It was merely an accident, Counterpunch. Get back up to navigation." Impactor ordered.

"But-" Counterpunch started, but Impactor cut him off.

"Now, soldier!!"

With a grunt of acknowledgement, Counterpunch turned and slinked off towards the command deck.

Impactor turned to leave as well, but then tilted his head back towards Fractyl. "Put all of the remaining thiotimoline in the hold. Far away from the greenergon. We can't have a repeat of that now, can we?"

"I had already planned to do just that." Fractyl replied as he gathered three more beakers of thiotimoline in his arms. "And then I was going to ask Toxitron to leave. That would help even more."

Toxitron followed Fractyl out of the lab and through the battered remains of the cargo hold doors. "Scientists. Always the same. They exploit you when they have a use for you and then throw you away when you're inconvenient."

The Predacon geochemist turned and glared at Toxitron but found nothing to say. The large green and purple robot scuffed in victory and crawled back through the wrecked doorway, skulking away.

All too aware that they had been cast into the background as all the drama unfolded around them, Offroad and Alpha Bravo turned to one another with a mix of disbelief and shock on their faces. A smile slowly managed to creep across Offroad's face and the two erupted into laughter. The Autobot member of the duo pitched his thumb back towards the lab. "What a crew we're part of, eh?"

"Hey, they're the Wreckers, right?" Offroad chortled. "We should count ourselves lucky that we're still alive after spending this long with them."

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Alpha Bravo wasn't sure if he was ready for this. And if he was honest to himself, Offroad would say the same thing. The two Cybertronians had engaged in countless rescue missions together, from fires to structure collapses, to stranded hikers, to vehicular crashes, to medical emergencies, and everything in between. This though… This was different.

Abraxan security forces had been investigating the chemical manufacturing plant fire for nearly a year and everyone seemed to come to the same conclusion: It was intentional. Moreover, they had a list of suspects they wanted to take in – it was a very short list. In fact, there were only four names on it… And they were the four individuals now held up in an office building with a group of twenty hostages, multiple weapons, and some of the fuel additive that they had taken from the factory before they set the building ablaze.

Of course Alpha Bravo had seen war, sieges, and hostage situations before… on Cybertron. But having spent years now on Abraxas dedicated to the protection of the inhabitants, what were they going to do when the Abraxans were turned against one another? What should they do if faced with the decision to end four lives to save everyone else in the building?

As Offroad was mulling over what they would soon be up against, his scanners drifted upwards to Alpha Bravo's helicopter mode. To regular visual sensors – as well as Abraxan eyes – the pods mounted on the sides of white aircraft were medical stretchers. But Offroad's scanners penetrated Alpha Bravo's holographic glimmer and detected the truth – each pod was in fact three missiles loaded and ready to bare.

"And I thought I would be the one ready for the worst." Offroad beamed.

Alpha Bravo didn't respond. Not immediately anyway. After about half a minute, Alpha Bravo sent his own beam.

"I hope I never have to use them."

The office building loomed up ahead, a destination that both were eager to reach… and eager to avoid. The Cybertronians maintained radio silence as they approached, but inside their drive compartments Captain Jorrval and now full-ranked Lieutenant Feenliess chattered non-stop as they coordinated with other units. Alpha Bravo listened in on the Captain's communication, learning new regulations and procedure as she directed both hers and neighboring jurisdictions' squads. Offroad didn't bother listening to the Lieutenant. It all sounded important, sure, but not important for him. He knew he'd get parked away from the action once more and have to sit there as he watched everyone else carry out the rescue. Sure he'd found ways to get involved in the past, but those were the very rare occasions.

Alpha Bravo felt Cpt. Jorrval pull back on the steering harness and instinctively began to ascend. She had been discussing with the ground crews how she would try to get a visual on the hostage takers. With any luck, they would have confined themselves to one area, allowing for small infiltration squads to start taking the building back floor by floor.

However, luck ran hollow. Alpha Bravo hovered two blocks away from the office building, but at an angle that gave the Captain a clear view through the building's windows. Each of the hostage takers had four hostages with them and they were all on different floors. She couldn't see where the other four hostages were.

"Check the count, are we sure that it's twenty hostages?"

Her radio buzzed with static for an instant and then a deep, gruff voice came back through. "That's confirmed. All twenty personnel in the Wesxliff office were grabbed, sir."

"Then where are they…" Cpt. Jorrval muttered to herself. "Alright, I want a team on the north side with heat vision equipment. And another on the south side. We're not going to make any movements until we find EVERYONE in that building. Has anyone tried to contact them for their demands?"

Alpha Bravo didn't hear the answer. His processors were frantically searching his memory files. Wesxliff… That was familiar. Where had he heard it before? There it was. Mentioned two months ago, once, in a file about…

By The Pit… "Offroad! We have to stop them!"

Offroad's scanners followed Lieutenant Feenliess as she stepped out of the truck and tried to clear a group of photographers and media personalities from a nearby alleyway. "Shouldn't we at least wait to hear if their demands will be met?"

"They're not going to make any demands. This isn't some building in which they happened to get cornered. This is Wesxliff Industrial Trust." Alpha Bravo's beam seemed to put some importance into the name.

The importance was lost on Offroad, "And what's that?"

"They're the owners of that chemical plant from all those months ago." Alpha Bravo clarified.

Offroad corrected his Autobot friend, or so he thought, "No. No. That was a Ghepisn Manufacturing plant."

"And Ghepisn is a shell corporation owned by Wesxliff. Those four are on a mission; they're never going to trade those hostages." Alpha Bravo realized that the Captain had been yanking on the steering yolk, trying to get him to land. He complied. "They're going to blow that building up just like they did the plant."

"I'd ask why, but… the Cybertronian Wars blew up a lot of buildings for no reason…" Offroad started his engine, which alerted Lt. Feenliess. She turned and tried to run back to the truck, but didn't make it before the vehicle pulled away… She could have sworn the woman behind the wheel looked just like her. "Well, I do have to know… Why?"

"Ever hear of thorrinault?" The Autobot sent an inquisitive beam.

"Actually, yes."

Alpha Bravo continued as though he didn't get Offroad's beam. "It's a very rare element found in only a few providences. Most of those have made very lucrative deals with Wesxliff… and then went dry. But there were a couple of hold-outs. Providences with the highest estimated concentrations."

Offroad bumped the curb as he rounded the corner, his tire sagged around the concrete and then bounced back into form. "And they think that Wesxliff somehow intruded on their territory to secure thorrinault without permission and now through some sort of provincial pride are now trying to strike back… Yup, that's all too familiar. And dangerous."

"Exactly. Any cause can escalate to massacre if you let it."

The gray Decepticon masquerading as a rescue vehicle pulled up to an underground parking garage below the office building. He quietly rolled into the structure, trying not to draw attention to himself. *Please have a freight elevator, please have a freight elevator…* Offroad kept repeating to himself. The wishful thinking didn't help him; there was only an Abraxan-sized lift. Which itself was inoperable, probably due to the trespassers' tampering. "The building has been cleared except for the bad guys and their hostages, right? And the first one is on the third floor?"

"Yep. You should be good." From his position on the ground, Alpha Bravo could just barely follow Offroad's movements inside the building.

"AGH! Sonnuva glitch!!!" Offroad's voice sounded pained. "I… uhhh… agh…"

"What? What is it??" Alpha Bravo's mind raced with possibilities of what could have gone wrong.

Offroad's shoulders scraped as he tried to turn up the next flight of stairs. The concrete cracked and moaned beneath him. "Uhhh… They sure didn't make these stairs with Cybertronians in mind."

Alpha Bravo fought back a snicker. "You're coming up on the third floor. Try to be a little quiet?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I'll be silent like a Metallikato master." Offroad's beam switched off. Then quickly back on. "Ahh! Slaggit, that's a low ceiling!"

This time Offroad's Autobot ally couldn't fight it and broadcasted a tittle. The Decepticon let it go, promising to razz Alpha Bravo later about it. He pushed open the door to Floor 3, then bent the door frame so that he could squeeze through. The effort made more noise than he expected and the hostage taker grabbed the closest Wesxliff worker he could, a middle-age man with eyeglasses.

"Whoa whoa, relax. I'm not here to hurt you." Offroad's graveled voice didn't sound nearly as nonthreatening as he had hoped.

The hostage taker and hostage were trembling equally as Offroad towered over them. Even on his knees, his bulk was twisting the paneled ceiling above him. Through quivering lips hostage taker managed to squeak out "Wha-what are you??"

"I'm, well… It's actually a LONG story." The Decepticon pulled out his carburetor carbine and pulled the trigger. Although it seemed to do nothing, it had indeed fired a pocket – or more accurately, a pellet – of invisible gas towards the hostage taker. It burst open when it hit the hostage taker and within seconds he had breathed in enough of the substance to knock him unconscious.

The terrified hostages stared at the hostage taker then Offroad. "It's just a stunner. He'll be fine. The stairs are… pretty messed up. Crumbling might be a better way to put it. If you can make it out, by all means try. Otherwise… stay here and take cover until the other crews can get you out?"

None of the hostages moved, they just kept staring at him. Offroad shrugged then climbed back through to the stairs. "Okay. Staying here it is then."

The next two suspects went down about the same. Only with a little less bumbling. After incapacitating the third one, Offroad got a beam from Alpha Bravo. "I'm picking up a localized radio source. I think the head suspect is attempting to call his teammates. If they don't answer… Offroad, he's the one with the detonator."

"I'm on my way." With a lurch, Offroad made for the stairs to the top floor.

Alpha Bravo beamed again, "Did you find the other four hostages?"

Offroad didn't answer.

"Did you?"

Offroad's beam finally chirped, "You don't want to know."

"Offroad, I…" The Autobot's voice traveled off. Then suddenly, "Get up there now!"

Alpha Bravo watched as the last remaining hostage taker held the detonator and shouted something into a telephone. He imagined that the hostage taker was talking with the security force.

Offroad climbed up the stairs faster after getting Alpha Bravo's beam. Perhaps too fast. The moorings that held the stairs

started to buckle under his weight and cement cracked, metal bent and tore. It wasn't long before the stairs underneath him tumbled away down the stair well. It was an unnerving feeling, suddenly having the ground beneath him fall away, but his quick Cybertronian reflexes let him grab onto the stairs in front of him. His fingers dug into the concrete. "Uh, Alpha. I have a problem."

"I'm on it." Captain Jorrval had left Alpha Bravo's cockpit and was checking in with the rest of the squad. He prepped his rotor and took off, hoping that no one was watching.

The windows to the top floor were tinted, but Alpha Bravo wasn't using his optics. Scanners flared to life and instantly pinpointed the suspect. He also saw Offroad, who was pulling himself up from a hole in the stairway. The Autobot cut his engine, retracted his blades, extended his arms, and converted to robot mode as he dove straight for the window closest to the suspect with the detonator. Glass and metal debris flew across the room, causing the suspect to shield himself. Tumbling out of control, Alpha Bravo made a grab for the detonator. He missed.

Despite the glass embedded in his skin and despite the confusion brought by a giant somersaulting robot, the head hostage taker managed to keep the clear vision to complete his mission. It was after all just a single button that he needed to push…

Four drums of Ghepisn fuel additive exploded and with it half the building was engulfed in a hellstorm of fire and flame. Alpha Bravo and Offroad were ejected by the explosion and plummeted from the building along with a cascade of falling concrete slabs and metal girders. The hostages in the building weren't as lucky.

*****

"Okay so Offroad and myself were already prepared for the Combiner program, but how do you explain Counterpunch? How is he going to get upgraded for combination?" Alpha Bravo fidgeted in Fractyl's lab.

Fractyl nervously studied the unconscious Toxitron lying face down on the improvised surgical table. It had taken the ship's entire stock of sedatives as well as twenty rounds from Offroad's carburetor carbine to knock out the sizeable Decepticon. "Counterpunch was upgraded when he was rebuilt on Paradron. Impactor has been planning this for a very long time."

"And you?" Offroad had never been comfortable in a Decepticon medical bay, let alone a Predacon's lab. There were good, authentic doctors and scientists on his side during his war, but let's be honest here, there were also more than a few whack jobs running around.

"This isn't my original body either. I've been a jet, a lizard bird thing, and then a jet again. That last time is when Impactor clued me in on the whole Combiner idea." The Predacon picked up a large, purple, metallic orb and held it over Toxitron's back – or rather what Fractyl theorized to be a chest for his combined mode. Shards of greenergon were latticed inside of the orb into a refractory, well, matrix. Fractyl had snickered at the word play the first few times that he described it.

"Are you ready for this?" Impactor strode up beside Fractyl.

Fractyl nodded. Impactor detached his blade hand, giving it to the scientist. "It has a light-emitted edge. So you can slice and dice and not have to worry about the ooze melting it."

"If you don't mind, I think I'll step outside now." Alpha Bravo stood up, his eyes locked on what he could only describe as a sword in Fractyl's hand.

Offroad followed him out of the lab, "I'm going to go too."

Fractyl watched the two leave and breathed a sigh of relief now that it was just him and Impactor. "You know; I've never actually done this. I mean, I am a geochemist not a medical doctor. Does everyone keep forgetting that?"

"I won't think less of you. Why don't you go somewhere else for half a cycle and when you get back, he'll be open and ready for installation." Impactor held his open hand out.

Fractyl gave the sword-scalpel back to Impactor and scurried from the lab. "Thank you."

With a twist and turn, the blade clicked into place where Impactor's right hand should be. Before setting to work, however, he pulled a glass container from a compartment in his back. It was round and oblong with a digital device attached to one end. The corners of his mouth dropped just a little bit more when he pressed a button and activated the receiver.

*****

"I don't understand. The engine is fine when we run trials, but as soon as we get called for a mission… vapor lock." Captain Jorrval leaned into Alpha Bravo's engine compartment one last time. Everything still looked exactly as it should. Or better considering the maintenance time that she put into keeping everything clean and up to spec.

Feenliess sauntered up behind her captain and rested her chin over Jorrval's shoulder. The Lieutenant pretended to study the twisting wires, pipes, and valves of the engine block. "Oh… I see what's going on here…"

"You do?" Jorrval craned her neck to face Feenliess, a look of surprise filled the Captain's eyes.

Feenliess nodded, her chin still on the Captain's shoulder. "It's not the engine that's stalling… you are. For your date."

Captain Jorrval pulled away from Feenliess and slumped her shoulders as if to sulk. "But I don't want to! It's going to be horrible."

The Lieutenant smiled. "No, it's not. You're going to have a great time!"

"Fine." Jorrval tottered off in her slouch. "But I'm wearing this."

"Your overalls? Hey if it was me, that would be fine. You don't have to impress me." Lieutenant Feenliess pulled and straightened the one-piece body suit which the Captain wore. "But let's get you in a shower and then find something nicer for you to wear."

"Ugh…why?"

"Because…" The Lieutenant dipped her fingers into an open jar on the work bench, then dabbed the black viscous substance on Jorrval's nose. "…You have grease on your face."

The Captain let out an exaggerated huff. Then she let a smile slither across her face. "Alright. If we're going to do this, let's do it before I change my mind."

Offroad's sensors followed the Abraxan partners down a short flight of stairs and out of the station. He then turned the sensors on Alpha Bravo. The Autobot sat motionless as a helicopter, refusing to break the silence of the now empty station house. Offroad shifted into robot mode and ambled over to the mobile helipad on which Alpha Bravo was resting. "When are those two going to learn that they're only happy together?"

Alpha Bravo didn't answer.

"Hey look…" Offroad started with the most compassionate voice he could produce, "…It's been six months now. What happened was an absolute tragedy, but we're all getting over it. I mean really; the Captain on a date! Who would have ever thought that after her -"

Alpha Bravo's muttered, sullen voice cut Offroad short. "But none of you were the ones responsible. I could have stopped it. Ended it before…" Alpha Bravo's voice sputtered as he trailed off.

"Don't do that. Not to yourself." Offroad's tone was stern but sympathetic. "You weren't the one holding the detonator."

If it weren't for the topic, Offroad would have though Alpha Bravo's grumble cute, "Yeah, because I missed when I grabbed for it."

The gray Decepticon slapped the side of the helicopter. "Transform and let's talk you through this. If you keep shirking missions, even the Captain – who loves you far more than that desk jockey she's going on a date with – will have to report your 'malfunction' and have you carted off."

The white helicopter sighed and shuddered as it bent in half, and arms and legs emerged from its sides. Alpha Bravo though didn't muster the effort to stand, instead fell back onto his rear plating with a small thud of metal on tarmac. He sat there, his arms curled around his legs, quietly until he muttered. "I don't want to talk…"

Offroad sat down next to his friend, one leg tucked underneath himself. "Come on. We have to. We have to get you through this. You're just shell-shocked; I've seen it dozens of times before. You have to face it, and show it you're not going to let it win. You will, I know you. You're strong. You're fierce. You're the bravest robot I've ever known. And if you need help, I'll be here for yo—"

"Just…" Alpha Bravo sniffed and rocked his head to the side, away from Offroad. "Just tell me that it will be alright."

Offroad wrapped an arm around Alpha Bravo and patted his shoulder. With his free hand, Offroad lifted Alpha Bravo's chin so that the other robot could see the sincerety in his eyes. A reassuring smile smoothly slid across the Decepticon's angular face. "Alpha Bravo. Everything will be fine."

As the two robots sat in silence for the rest of the evening, Offroad couldn't help but wonder how long Captain Jorrval's date lasted.

*****

The landing wasn't the smoothest Alpha Bravo had experienced, but it also wasn't the roughest that Offroad had been through. The Wreckers' ship pitched and yawed as it snapped through the cable-like structures that blanketed the planet's surface. Alpha Bravo was beginning to doubt Impactor's choice of test site.

"Why did we pick this world again?" Alpha Bravo's voice bounced and vibrated with the ship.

Impactor, who seemed to have attached even more weapons to himself than was possible, glowered and smirked at the same time. It was unsettling. "You'll see."

The ship hit the floor of the forest? Jungle? With a sudden jolt. Counterpunch called down from the command deck, "Everyone still in one piece down there?"

As the cargo bay door began to unfold, the acrid, dense air of the planet's atmosphere leaked inside. It burned at the Wreckers' nasal receptors, causing more than one to completely deactivate their olfactory sensors. It was more than just the atmosphere that was rank and vile; there was the scent of death and decay looming in the air. Metal decay. And robot death. Alpha Bravo nervously activated the missile pods attached to his forearms.

"Smells like someone left the stove on." Offroad studied Toxitron's face but wasn't sure of the Decepticon's meaning. His gaze seemed distant rather than its usual menacingly sadistic look.

Counterpunch rushed to join the rest of the crew and reported, "Yup. Everyone looks great. Crisis averted. Next item: The ship's scanners are picking up lifeforms all around, big ones! And they're closing in on us."

"Tasties? Mhmm-hm-hmm." The massive booming voice shocked all of the Wreckers but Impactor.

A second voice cracked. "Cybertronian delicacies, a rare treat. Hard to come by anymore. We should savor them."

A red, skeletal forearm the size of an oil drill appeared from above the ship, at its end was a round sphere with three scimitar-like talons. The sharp metal claws buried into the ground as the arm strained to pull the rest of the massive creature into view. All that Alpha Bravo saw was teeth, some as long as he was tall. Others longer still. Speechless at the sight, he let Offroad's shriek speak for him, "You crazy, deluded Wrecker! You brought us into a Mecannibal hive???"

"If we're going to stand up to Thunder Mayhem," Impactor reasoned, "We need a real challenge to test our new weapon against."

Toxitron charged forward. "Brothers! Delightful devils with faces of hideous creation! You are magnificent!"

"This one smells different." A third deafening voice clapped. "He's mine first!"

One of the red ball hands snapped its sickle fingers around Toxitron's torso. His orange toxic ooze leaked from the wounds that the razor sharp blades dug into his armor. The green and purple robot expected the red creature to howl in pain and drop him back onto the hive floor… But it never did. The red glossy metal didn't even corrode.

A second hand viciously tore at Toxitron's chest, ripping free part of his shielding. Toxitron screamed in agony, a sound that not even he had heard before. The Mecannibal then tossed the hunk of metal plating into a waiting maw. A grin followed, toothy and evil. It licked the orange ooze clean from its hand, leaving not even a drop. "Ohhh… Spicy! Delicious!!"

Another Mecannibal crawled over the first and tried to wrest Toxitron free from its clutch, "Give it to me, I want it!"

The two monstrous beings tumbled and tossed each other around, all while both held onto Toxitron. The green Decepticon appeared to be enjoying the attention, his face-hole curved upright into a genuine smile.

"How can they touch him without the 'sizzle-pop-shriek' thing?" Counterpunch's question ripped Fractyl's horrified stare away from the horrendous scene in front of them.

"I…It makes sense. The Mecannibals have their own insidious chemical excretions… In their digestive systems. So to protect themselves from those, they must have astoundingly durable construction."

"Yes… No one has ever managed to kill a Mecannibal." Impactor stated without emotion. "Usually it's trick 'em or trap 'em."

"Then why are we here??" Offroad screamed.

Impactor turned nonchalantly towards the Decepticon. "To see if we can kill one. You should combine before Toxitron gets ripped to pieces."

"Yeah…" It was all that Counterpunch could manage to say. As Alpha Bravo rushed towards the Mecannibals fighting over Toxitron, he couldn't help but notice that he was doing so with two Decepticons and a Predacon. All former members of the factions, of course. They were now only Wreckers; any previous alliances didn't make a difference. Still he wondered how in the Pit he ended up in the situation.

"Alright everyone. Get ready to give them everything you've got. And aim for the hands, we need to knock Toxitron loose." Just as Offroad pulled his energy ax free from its storage compartment on his back, he realized he didn't need it. The second Mecannibal thrust the first against one of the larger spires of the web-like nest, freeing Toxitron from its grasp.

The green robot was now covered in orange ooze. It smoldered and burned where it dripped onto the Mecannibal spires. Alpha Bravo skidded and stopped short. "Uhm, did we even consider what that goo will do to us after we combine?

"Not even a bit." Fractyl brushed aside the question as he raced up to the prone Toxitron. "He has internal force fields. It's how he manages to hold his own weapons without, you know, burning them. They're what will protect us."

Offroad looked back at Alpha Bravo, sharing his friend's concern. "Are you sure?"

Fractyl began to convert into what appeared to be a floating leg. "Nope."

As Fractyl finished his transformation, Counterpunch started his. Soon a massive arm replaced his robot mode. Alpha Bravo could now feel the tug of the combination; he wasn't sure if he could resist the pull even if he tried. So he just let it happen. Quickly he became a leg and Offroad shifted into an arm.

Alpha Bravo was surprised how similar it was to transforming into helicopter mode. It was all the same sensations until the linkage formed. It wasn't painful, really, but it was certainly overwhelming. He could feel his mind leave his body through a network of wireless signals. A mesh of Toxitron's, Counterpunch's, Fractyl's, Offroad's, and his own processors reaching out and connecting. He could sense the other minds with him floating in a sort of void, but then they got bigger or the void got smaller. Everything was crowded. Boundaries were pressed; he was against Offroad and Counterpunch, Toxitron was against Fractyl and Offroad. And the squeezing just kept getting worse until the boundaries popped and suddenly Alpha Bravo truly was not alone. He could see the others' memories, touch them, live them. He saw a Decepticon in shining black armor standing over him. The robot's teal face split down the middle like a Vespoid when he talked about an experiment. Wait… What's a Vespoid? That word came from someone else. Fractyl… Fractured. Counterpunch. His memories were a jumble and everything seemed to come in twos. Two lives living side by side and neither knowing which was real. Twos… Two robots. Sitting side by side inside of a familiar building. Offroad! That dear friend! Who was the other robot? It was him. He was the other robot. But what was his name? It was there, he remembered it distinctly. "Alpha Bravo". It didn't feel like his name though. It felt like catching a name in a conversation. It felt like it was someone else's. His name was something different. Something new…

"It worked!" In a rare instance, Impactor let his emotions show. He pumped his one good fist in triumph. "What's…What's your name?"

Name. Name. It was there, forming on his tongue like a springtime seedling. When the shell popped and the sprout burst free… "Wreckage. We…are Wreckage."

The Mecannibals were not deterred by the sight of the new giant robot in front of them; they only saw a larger meal. The two from before drooled as a dozen more swarmed from the hive's honeycomb. They scuttled and clamored through the latticed

webbing until they surrounded Wreckage. Perhaps still becoming used to himself, the combiner only watched as the red orb shaped monsters with crab-like legs descended.

The first bite from a Mecannibal's crushing jaw finally triggered a reaction from Wreckage. A massive hand clamped down on the metal muncher and began to crush the creature. A boost of power came flooding from the greenergon chamber in Wreckage's chest, charging the servos in the hand. The Mecannibal cracked wide open and spilled noxious acids across the hive floor. The deceased drone's brethren stared in disbelief at the emptied carcass, and then on cue began to scamper back through the dense webbing and away from Wreckage.

Rage. Anger. Vengeance. A need to damage. A need to destroy. He felt all. It was revolting. It was despicable. It was wondrous. These were intense feelings that he had never experienced before… And they felt so good! He could not help but give into them.

Wreckage grabbed another Mecannibal and crumpled it in his bare hand. Then he grabbed another. And another. And stomped at two more. Soon he was tearing through the hive's spires, hunting down every Mecannibal he could find just to experience that satisfying crunch of their carapaces. The webbing and its interwoven spires were expansive, however, and the Mecannibals knew every passageway through it all. Their retreat was efficacious; Wreckage had quickly ran out of prey to mangle. That's when he turned and saw Impactor.

None of his individual components had an issue with commander. And neither did Wreckage, actually. However, there he was and he looked like something that could be wrecked. The combiner lumbered back towards the space ship where Impactor stood by the cargo bay door. The purple and yellow robot dug into a compartment on his back. He found what he was searching for; it was indeed still there, should Impactor have to use it…

"Wreckers! Disengage!" Impactor called out with authority. Wreckage didn't stop. Each footstep nearer shook the ground just that much more.

Impactor took a step backwards but then puffed out his chest and struck a stoic pose. "Disengage…. Now!"

Wreckage didn't stop. He didn't want to stop. He wanted to keep tearing this planet apart. He was close enough now that he could reach his arms out and grab the Wreckers' spaceship… But it was Impactor who had his attention.

"Disengage."

The combiner swung one of his massive arms and just barely missed Impactor; the Wrecker had to jump backward and twist from the path of Wreckage's fist. The massive robot pulled back his other fist, ready to bring it smashing down.

"DISENGAGE!"

The voice wasn't Impactor's. In fact, it wasn't a voice. It was coming from inside Wreckage's head, shouting as loud it could manage. Wreckage paused to try to identify it. It sounded familiar, but not to his ears. He hadn't heard it before, how could he? It couldn't exist while he was formed. Then came the name... Who was Alpha Bravo?

"DISENGAGE FOR PIT'S SAKE!!!"

*****

His eyes sprung open as he woke from his nightmare world. No… It wasn't all nightmares. The worst of it was real.

Alpha Bravo was sitting in what passed for a medical bay inside the Wreckers' ship. It was clean but small, cramped, and also served as the rec room. There were only the two tables, so Toxitron, Offroad, and Fractyl had been placed in seated positons on the floor. Alpha Bravo turned to look at Counterpunch, who was on the other table. The Wrecker spy was already awake and rubbing his shoulder joints. "That was a trip, wasn't it?"

The white and orange Autobot sat up a bit too fast and his spinning head complained. He managed to moan, "That's putting it awfully mildly. Didn't you find it… Disturbing? Hearing the others' thoughts and memories like that?"

If he had found any displeasure in the experience, Counterpunch didn't show it. "That part I'm used to."

"There was just so much…" Alpha Bravo paused. "So much 'Con."

Counterpunch laughed. "You thought that was bad? That's my every moment. Knowing who I am, knowing what I stand for... You just got a bit of... a taste, really. Of the different perspectives. If I were only so lucky."

"I know." Alpha Bravo sniggered. "I've seen all of your pasts. I know what led you down the paths you've taken and it was all… reasonable. But… didn't you get a glimpse at our future too?"

Counterpunch shrugged. "Future? I don't even have my past figured out yet."

"Right." Alpha Bravo dropped his feet to the floor and shuffled out of the medical bay and into the gray hallway that ran back to the crew quarters. He had a lot to think about; five lifetimes worth.

"Anyway, Impactor is going to want us to report when the others are up and online." Counterpunch called after him. Alpha Bravo didn't turn around, he kept stumbling his way back to his own room. His servos and actuators felt like they were running on reserve power and, due to a severe case of vertigo, the hallway dipped and churned with each step. The Autobot finally reached his quarters and with a lurch, clung to the door frame. He struggled to key in his access code; eventually the door slid open and he fell into the darkness inside.

Counterpunch didn't see it. Alpha Bravo doubted the others did either. He had felt Wreckage; he was a part of him. He knew what the Combiner had in mind and it wasn't justice. In Impactor's ambition to create a better monster than Thunder Mayhem, he had forgotten how terrible the united warrior form of Mayhem Attack Squad truly was. He had forgotten that if he wanted something worse, he was creating an even bigger threat to the galaxy. To the universe. Wreckage didn't seek to just stop Thunder Mayhem, he wanted to REPLACE him. He wasn't repulsed by the destruction and death for which the other Combiner was responsible, he envied it.

Alpha Bravo knew that Impactor wouldn't understand. The Wrecker had been so focused on his revenge that it had become his only goal. There was nothing after it. No rebuilding, no cleaning up after their

mess – there was simply destroying the thing that destroyed his planet. He didn't care what happened to Wreckage after he defeated Thunder Mayhem. He didn't even care about what would happen to himself. Scrap, Impactor probably thought he wasn't going to be alive after all that. He probably thought he was going to die in the battle. He probably wanted it.

Reliving the parts of Wreckage's psyche that he remembered, Alpha Bravo knew that there was no doubt about any of this. If he let Wreckage combine again, that would be it. Wreckage would become fear. He would become death. He would become the destroyer of worlds. Alpha Bravo sighed and grabbed for a pink glowing bottle next to his bunk. He unscrewed the top and poured half a glass of the piquant smelling liquid. Swirling the contents, he couldn't help but gaze into the tiny vortex it formed - a tiny funnel spinning into the abyss.

Toxitron. Might as well start with the least likely candidate. None of the weapons on board the ship would be able to deal him any sort of finality. He'd be able to recover and heal from any wound Alpha Bravo could deliver. Could he simply jettison him into space? No. By the time Alpha Bravo would be able to shut the bulkhead and enter the proper command codes to open the outer hatch, Toxitron would have been able to burn his way free. It couldn't be Toxitron.

Alpha Bravo winced as the light from the hallway suddenly bore into the dark room. Its photons dug at the Autobot's eyes like thousands of tiny needles, although Offroad's silhouette in the doorway did provide some relief.

"The others are all back online and talking. Impactor wants us on the command deck." Offroad's voice was strong and unwavering, but the way he stood made it clear to Alpha Bravo that he too was feeling some of the same nausea. Alpha Bravo motioned for the Decepticon to come sit on the bunk with him.

"I poured some energon." His hand trembled ever so slightly as he offered the glass to Offroad. "Would you like some?"

Offroad took the glass. "Smelt yes. I feel like I just went through a defrag cycle."

Counterpunch. The guy was jittery. Not in a nervous way, but in a way that a pneuma-lion on the prowl was constantly alert and aware of its surroundings. He was just too good of a spy, to be honest. Maybe that's why Impactor had started keeping him isolated and on the command deck; Counterpunch was always watching whenever he was in the room with others. Observing them, probably assessing each and every one of their weaknesses. No. There was no way that Alpha Bravo could sneak up on Counterpunch. There was no way to surprise him in an ambush.

The energon buzzed in Offroad's mouth as energy crackled through the liquid and discharged against his palate. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Hrm?" Offroad's question failed to rouse Alpha Bravo from his thoughts. The response was automatic.

The Decepticon smiled and clasped Alpha Bravo's shoulder. "Scrap. Combination hit you HARD."

"Yeah. It did." Alpha Bravo still stared at the floor.

Fractyl. The geochemist was easily distracted by his work. Getting the drop on him would be easy, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was that Furmanite armor of his. Alpha Bravo had no idea what it was capable of deflecting. None of the Wreckers knew how vulnerable--or invulnerable--Fractyl truly was. They just knew that the green Predacon with the squeaky voice insisted on bi-monthly showers in the stuff. They had also seen Fractyl take an accidental slip of his energy scalpel without any damage to any of his digits. Alpha Bravo would rather not take the risk that a laser blast would similarly fail to score damage.

Offroad wiped at a drop of energon that had pooled in the corner of his mouth, then held the glass out to Alpha Bravo. "Thanks. I needed that. Although from the looks of you, I think you need it even more."

Himself. Yes. It could be him, couldn't it? No… It couldn't. That math didn't work. Even if Alpha Bravo was gone, there would still be five Wreckers. Impactor had insisted on staying individual and not becoming part of Wreckage. Though Alpha Bravo knew the wily purple robot would be desperate enough to get his revenge that he would step up as a replacement limb without hesitation. If this were to work, there would have to be TWO casualties. It would have to be…

The lights snapped on and Alpha Bravo flinched. Offroad was standing by the light switch. "Sorry about that, but we really do have to get going."

"Offroad, I-" Alpha Bravo balled his fists. His missile pods were still online from the fight against the Mecannibals.

"What is it, Alph-?"

The first missile struck Offroad in the chest. The armor buckled and bent inward but still protected the vital instruments inside. The second missile caused more damage. A hole tore through Offroad's chest then energon and scraps of metal sprayed out of his back. The Decepticon's eyes were wide and silently fixed on Alpha Bravo.

The Autobot. The trigger puller. The damn fool who shot his friend. He rushed to Offroad and tried to drape his arms around him, but the both of them collapsed to the floor instead. Alpha Bravo landed on his knees with Offroad in his lap. Alpha Bravo wrapped an arm around Offroad. The Decepticon's head fell forward against Alpha Bravo's chest. With his free hand, Alpha Bravo lifted Offroad's chin so that to the other robot's eyes could see the reassurance in his own. "Offroad…I… I hope you see… Everything will be fine…"

Alpha Bravo watched as Offroad's eyes faded from his particularly brilliant shade of orange-red into a burnt crimson and finally to black. Offroad was gone, but Alpha Bravo couldn't let him go. He cradled his friend as he waited. It wasn't long before Toxitron burst into the room and drew his Angonizer Blade. The green and purple Decepticon howled, but the noise barely registered with Alpha Bravo. He hugged Offroad closer. He didn't feel the sword pierce his back. He didn't even feel its edge bisect his spark. He had already broken it himself.

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"They've ruined us! Robbed us of our chance at vengeance! They've left us in chaos and despair!" Toxitron's words boiled like the smelting pools of Darkmount, then came to a simmer. "I respect them, I really do."

"I thought they were friends?" Fractyl's voice rasped.

"Why? Why would Alpha Bravo do this?" Impactor's steely glare was colder than ever.

"I think… he saw what Wreckage would become – what he would become. And felt he had to stop it." Counterpunch's voice was steady. Any hesitation came from him finally piecing it all together.

Impactor's grimace could have been chiseled into his face. Forever forged in place. "The dunce. I had it under control."

"How?" Toxitron's eyes narrowed. He suddenly felt used, as he had by the Decepticons.

Quietly, almost as a soliloquy, Fractyl murmured, "I did notice a beaker of thiotimoline was missing…"

"It doesn't matter." Impactor glowered. "Even if I joined... You've proven that as survivors, you're broken bits that no longer fit into anything larger. If we found someone else, it still wouldn't work. Replacement parts are a thing of the past; all that's left are more pieces that would come tumbling down. We've lost."

Toxitron grabbed the chair from the navigation console and slammed it to the floor. Parts launched free, bouncing off various other panels and controls. He then ripped the door from its frame and lumbered off towards the rear of the ship. Every so often, the Wreckers could hear another bulkhead bear Toxitron's wrath.

Counterpunch started gathering the broken fragments of the chair but stopped when he came across the Communications station. There a yellow bulb flashed with urgency. "Well, uh, sir... Looks like there is another broken piece out there. We're picking up a signal…"

"From where?" Impactor asked with more curiosity than hope.

The blue robot's hands furiously prodded at the holographic controls until an image of the transmission source appeared on a screen above the console. All three Wreckers knew the planet immediately. Floating in the middle of the screen was a familiar metal orb: Cybertron.

EPILOGUE

Alpha Bravo landed and converted into robot mode; helicopter blades retracted and the vehicle's canopy split to form slender legs. His brilliant white armor glowed orange from the fires surrounding him. Something on the edge of the field caught his eye. It was dark, black or perhaps gray, with spots of blue and red. And a very bright green face. A very bright green *robot* face. Alpha Bravo swore he felt his energon pump sputter.

"Are you okay?" Alpha Bravo inquired. The gray and blue robot stopped and looked his way.

"I think so. But I could sure use a cold glass of energon right now." His voice was gruff, in an interesting sort of way. It was a voice that Alpha Bravo could imagine listening to for hours on end, and after spending all this time in solitude on Abraxas, he longed for the opportunity to hear someone else's stories.

"I might be able to help you with that." Alpha Bravo held out his hand.

The robot took it. It was a firm handshake, one that made Alpha Bravo's hand tingle. "Thanks. But aren't you worried about…"

His voice trailed off as he brushed ash from his armor plating. Alpha Bravo noticed the purple badge on the robot's chest. It was Decepticon. There was a momentary twinge of anxiety but it was quickly released. Alpha Bravo had known Decepticons before and knew they couldn't all be judged by the actions of a few of their leaders. Or their scientists.

"I'm not prejudiced." Alpha Bravo cupped his hand on the robot's shoulder. "In fact I'm pretty open."

"That's…" The orange red of the robot's eyes pulsed bright for a second. "Good to hear. Because I've left that portion of my life a long, long time ago."

Alpha Bravo glanced back at the debris field. "I…uhm… I don't think you'll be able to fix your ship."

The robot chuckled. It was a symphony of electronic whirs competing for the deepest bass. "That's okay, I'm perfectly fine with that. I'm ready to start over somewhere new. And this certainly is new."

"So you'd stay!" Alpha Bravo lowered his voice to try to not sound so excited. "Let me show you around then. Oh, but first you'll need an alternate mode."

"Okay. But I'm not going to be a sports car." There was the musical laugh again.

"Who'd want that?" Alpha Bravo chaffed. "Come on, let's find something suitably burly. And then the two of us, we're going to be inseparable…"