TRANSFORMERS TIMELINES PRESENTS:

LIFE FINDS A WAY

A TALE FROM OF MASTERS AND MAYHEM

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LIFE FINDS A WAY

"Scrap me on a motherboard."

Those were the first words to escape Fractyl's mouth through his gritted teeth. The Stasis Pod around him was badly damaged...which he knew right off the bat, since he came out of stasis lock to the immediate sound of a screaming computer's voice blasting his audio receptors to bits.

WARNING. STASIS POD INTEGRITY CRIT-CRIT-CRITICAL. ENERG-G-G-GON READINGS EXCEED SAF-SAF-SAFETY PARAMATERS. WARNING. WARNING. WARNI-NI-NI-NI-NI-NI-NI-NI-NI-

"SHUT UP!" Fractyl shouted angrily.

COMPLYING.

"...Oh. That was easy."

The Stasis Pod was damaged, but wasn't broken open, as far as the internal readouts could say. Clearly, there had been a crash...but how? Why? Fractyll struggled to recall what had happened before he went into stasis...and then, he felt his memory chips rebooting...and it all came flooding back.

"Thunder...slagging...Mayhem."

Cybertron was gone. Or at least it might as well be. His home...and the ancestral home of every Cybertronian in the universe. Annihilated by someone, or something, named Thunder Mayhem.

Primus below, I just hope enough bots got away in time...maybe Vice Grip was one of them...

Everything happened so fast and it was all Fractyl could do to get in a Stasis Pod before the ship carrying them launched. So now the question was, where did he land? He prayed to whatever god would be listening that he didn't land on some errant moon or asteroid. He didn't have the energon to just fly around in empty space.

Wait a cycle...the computer said that there were high energon readings...

Given that energon was natural only to Cybertron, and a handful of other worlds seeded by the machinations of higher lifeforms, it was entirely possible that it was an older cyberformed outer belt object or other small planetoid that broke apart some millennia ago.

He knew he should try to fix the internal scanners of the pod, but he always hated being cramped in those things. Nothing short of planetary destruction could usually get him into one.

According to the readout, the pod was in a crater. No surprise there; he must have been jettisoned in the crash. It was a safety measure in case the ship was so badly compromised it could potentially destroy the pods along with itself. Using his own built-in sensors, he couldn't detect anyone around, though there was a striking amount of biological information flooding his processor. Unfortunately he was a geochemist, not a biologist, ergo his sensors hadn't been calibrated to specify organic matter in a long time. He knew he could just fly up and get a better look

over the lip of the crater, which was a good 20 or 30 meters deep, but he didn't want to expend his own energon, no matter how much was apparently just lying around. And there was a LOT, as far as his immediate vicinity was concerned. The pod's own scanners were definitely showing signs of natural energon. Too much energon.

He didn't dare open the pod, but he may not have a choice.

"Computer, how long until pod succumbs to energon radiation?

45 NANO-CYCLES.

Scrap. Not enough time.

If he passed out on some Primus-forsaken rock with nobody to reactivate him, he could be stuck there forever, good as dead. He needed to begin the energon-dampening adjustment procedures in his subroutines before going into stasis lock or he'd be scrap.

Fractyl could already feel the energon buildup from the broken seals on the pod. If he didn't start the process now, there would be no waking back up.

"Computer! Compensate for excess energon readings!"

WARNING. P-P-P-PROCESS WILL TAKE APPROXIMATELY TWO CYCLES. SUBJECT FRACTYL WILL BE VULNERABLE WHILE IN STASIS LOCK.

"Just do it!"

ACKNOWLEDGED. ACTIVATING STASIS LOCK.

Fractyl could feel his sensors start to go dark...but not before a group of shapes began to gather around the outside of the pod. He couldn't really make them out through the cracked glass and sensor readouts, but the last thing he felt before the dark grip of stasis was a pounding dread in his spark.

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When Fractyl's sensors came back online, he had no idea how many cycles had passed...and it was also the least of his concerns. The energon buildup had worn off, at least, and thankfully his auxiliary systems had adjusted for the field tolerances.

His optics blinked on, and struggled to adjust to the low light...it was night, but flickering images played in his vision. Although, more troubling, he couldn't move. He was out of stasis lock, but his limbs were immobile.

No...wait...the word is "restrained."

Fractyl was strung up like an insecticon about to be pinned into a giant glass display case. He craned his head awkwardly about, trying to identify what had been done to him, and where he was. His arms

and legs had be lashed to a pair of huge columns that flanked his sides, his wrists and ankles were individually held taut by sturdy ropes of an unknown filament. It all stank of some primitive ceremony. Before he could fully ascertain the rest of his predicament, a shape entered his view. It was slightly larger than him, and it chittered and moved about with many appendages and mandibles. It stood tall and almost regal in its stature, the chitinous exoskeleton of its body adorned with pigments and trinkets, indicating intelligence.

"Oh. Oh, I don't like where this is going," Fractyl managed to squawk, before the strange termite-like insectoid clasped his mouth shut. It then turned, spurred by multiple legs, to a crowd of gathered insects that were clearly its kin. It cackled in some dialect that Fractyl's universal translator struggled to comprehend. Regardless of the specifics, he knew the basics: though he had done no offense to these....well, "people," they must consider him some sort of abomination. An invader. An enemy they were familiar with.

Could they have encountered other Cybertronians?!

Fractyl didn't dare transform – the way he was restrained, he risked tearing his own limbs apart. However, he knew he couldn't stay to have his spark torn out or whatever they planned to do with him. It was night, and there were great green flaming braziers that lit up the center of this strange outdoor compound, or nest, or whatever it was. Perhaps a silent distress signal? The pod could have activated it but it may have been too badly damaged in the crash.

Regardless, Fractyl didn't have much more time to think, as the shaman (or whatever the proper title was) shuffled back in front of him. It rasped something at him, and with one of its claws, reached over and lifted a shard of strange green mineral from the claws of another insect, who had been standing to the side, dutifully holding it as part of some broader ceremonial hierarchy.

The shaman leaned in with the shard, holding it close to Fractyl's eyes. The geologist in him immediately wanted to know more about whatever it was, even as the survivor in him was screaming to find an escape. The insect snarled something that his sensors were still trying to decipher.

"Sorry...I don't speak 'angry invertebrate.' Not yet anyway. Although you probably aren't going to give me the cha-"

A sudden shrieking noise rocked the gathering. The insects, who has been humming and chattering, were struck silent by the sudden noise. Then...chaos. Insects were scattering as strange shapes began to move through them, cutting to and fro, sending insects flying, along with a handful of detached limbs. Fractyl couldn't tell how many there were, but the insects were adapting quickly, arming themselves with bladed weapons and beginning to form up into protective groups.

By Primus they are well organized, Fractyl mused. But what the Pit are they fighting? What is going ON?

Suddenly, one small grouping of warriors were sent sprawling. A flash or orange and blue, briefly illuminated by the green light, was only barely perceptible by Fractyl's optics before another flash of green, scaled hide plowed through three insects, limbs sent flying. A smaller blur of white feathers pounced on top of a considerably large soldier, gnawing on its head and it shrieked in anger.

The insect warriors had clearly had enough, and started to scatter. Some were missing their limbs, others carry-

ing fallen comrades...none had shed their mortal coils, however. These invaders weren't taking prisoners, but they weren't massacring their prey either. The sconces had been knocked over, and the surrounding jungle pressed in with increasing darkness, save the lights on the makeshift sacrificial stage.

The shaman rose to his full height, held his arms high and shrieked his hellish language into the darkness. He had two soldiers remaining by his sides...until there was only one, the other dragged off into the shadows. The final insect soldier fearlessly swept his lance-like weapon to and fro, ornately carved and tipped with green blades. After an extremely painful silence, a great green shape threw itself from the darkness and removed his lance...not to mention the arm holding it. The insect did not shriek in pain, but moved to fight. The reptilian creature snapped and swept its claws at him, when a second animal, half the size of the first and a mass of white feathers, collided with its back and pinned him to the ground. The shaman snarled at the attackers who had defeated his ally, but then whirled around. Fractyl craned his head to see that, to his left, and before the shaman's gaze, there stood a creature of blue and gold. A magnificent specimen, its tufts of feathers flexing in a display of intimidation. It flexed its claws and roared at the shaman. He was undaunted, and moved quickly behind Fractyl's restrained form. He still grasped the shard of rock (was it a rock or a crystal? I have to get a sample if I survive this mess) and held it to Fractyl's back, right behind where his spark was encased.

They HAVE met Cybertronians...most other life forms go for the throat.

The three animals made no move to stop him. The green one snarled angrily. The small white one's head nervously darted from Fractyl to the big blue one. And that one did nothing. It didn't roar or make any kind of threat. It just gave this half-hearted, dull stare, like this was the most humdrum thing they could have possibly dealt with that day.

Suddenly, a shot rang out. Fractyl immediately recognized it as laser fire. And he was right, because mere nanokliks after the sound, the weapon exploded from the shaman's hand....along with most of his accompanying claws. He made no pained noises, only snarled in anger, and cursed something. The other three beasts puffed up and began moving towards him. Fractyl couldn't see him, but he must have done something the animals wanted, because they stopped their stalking. The white one bounced off of its fallen prey, who grudgingly rose, attempting to staunch the yellow fluid oozing from its stump with one of its remaining forearms. Fractyl twisted his head as far back as his metallic spine would allow, and saw the shaman and the remaining soldier moving off into the jungle.

Fractyl turned back to his saviors...or potential new captors. Had he been saved from a sacrificial ceremony only to be carved up and devoured?

"I'm fairly certain you can't understand me," Fractyl said nervously, "but you should know that I'm mostly cybernetics and mech fluid and energon. So I'd probably give you indigestion something fierce." The tall animal, lithe and powerful, reptilian with a hint of avian genetics, approached steadily, and seemed to... smile? Like lightening, her claws and teeth sliced the restraints on Fractyl's forearms and feet. He fell forward, catching himself awkwardly.

"Thanks...I think?" Fractyl said, trying to shake the nervousness in his voice that stuck around like scraplets on an old Junkion ship.

"You're lucky, brother!" he heard a voice chirp from his right. He swung his head to find the little raptor standing closest to him. "The Vespoids are kinda' nasty to...well, everyone like us."

Fractyl's stunned processor must have mirrored his face, because he could barely comprehend what was happening. The fact that the animals were speaking to him was surprising enough...but...

"Brother"? "Like us"? What in the galaxy is going on?

"Take it easy on him, little one," the blue beast said, teasingly. She had a laid-back, smooth, confident voice. Fractyl whirled about to face her, still struck dumb by this revelation. Most importantly, how were they speaking Cybertronia-

Realization hit him like a runaway cruiser.

They ARE Cybertronians!

"How is this possible?! Is this some sort of new transforming technology? I mean, it must be, I've never seen anything like it! Is it synthetic? I suppose it would have to be...I was so worried, I thought I'd be stuck here for eons! Where are your stasis pods? How long was I out? Did any of you have the same stasis lock problems? Probably all the natural energon readings, but what are your call signs? Where did the sniper-"

The green creature roared at Fractyl and that shut him up instantly. It was clearly irritated by him.

"I'm not an expert, but she probably thinks you talk too much," said the blue one. The green animal stalked away angrily and began gnawing on one of the twitching insectoid limbs strewn about the ground. Fractyl continued to watch it until the scaled head leered over its shoulder and curled its teeth at him.

"Gnash is a pretty good judge of character...which means that you're probably Decepticon," another, deeper voice came from behind Fractyl, practically making him jump out of his exostructure. A tall, lithe creature, covered in smooth, pitch-black feathers and a distinctive bright stripe going down her lateral sides, stalked from the darkness almost as though she were part of it.

"Slice here is your sniper," the blue creature (probably the leader) said matter-of-factly. "It was Shred's idea to save you in the first place."

"Tha-that's me! That's me! I'm the little one!" chirped the smaller feathered reptile.

"...aaaand the quiet one?" Fractyl said sheepishly.

"That'd be Gnash," the blue one answered.

After being able to observe her closely, Fractyl noticed that "Gnash's" beast mode appeared injured. Pieces of her flesh were torn away, exposing the robotic endoskeleton.

"...She's not damaged, is she?"

"Trust me, she is, but not in any way that matters on the surface," the blue raptor said, her voice tinged with a slightly more serious tone.

Fractyl cocked his head thoughtfully for a moment.

"And that would make you the commander?"

"Thrashclaw by designation. Thrash for short."

Something dawned on Fractyl that took him aback.

"Your terrifying friend – the feathered one – no the tall one - made note of my allegiance...or what she thought was my allegiance," Fractyl probed at Thrashclaw. "...I guess that would make me your prisoner..."

Fractyl had no desire for further conflict. Autobot or Decepticon, they were his best chance for survival. The death of a planet will do wonders for your personal politics.

"Hah! We can discuss that on the road. We've been chatting long enough; if we don't clear out, the Vespoids will be back and in force," Thrashclaw mused with a spring of humor to her vocal processor.

"All you need to know is that we're-"

"RAPTORICONS!" Shred interrupted loudly and proudly, causing Fractyl to jump again.

"Jumpy little Con, aren't you?" Slice snorted, as she melted back into the jungle.

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The journey to the base occupied by the "Raptoricons" was a relatively short one. Through the jungle and up a sheer cliff to a lush plateau, Fractyl decided to stay on the ground. Adjusting to the local energon fields had chewed up some of his own energon reserves, so flying around haphazardly could prove dangerous. If he flew too far from his new-found, er, "friends," he may not find them again. Their "beast modes," as Shred called them, masked their energy signatures amazingly well. That left plenty of time for talking, and despite the agitation of Slice and Gnash, who were unwilling to talk to him at all, Shred was all too eager to communicate.

Fractyl's primary point of interest was the astonishing technology that his fellow refugees had discovered, which they had adapted to and utilized in integrating into the local, untamed environment. Thrash confirmed Shred's prattling that they had found the advanced tech for creating a techno-organic hybrid transformation when they first landed and dug through the ruined remains of a massive, abandoned research station...possibly even a laboratory. While most of the remaining evidence of whatever space-faring civilization had created this biological preserve was non-Cybertronian, the "beast warrior" tech was perfectly compatible with their existing superstructures. Instead of having to constantly adjust their systems to tolerate the high levels of natural energon readings that would have shorted them out otherwise, the crew adapted the DNA-scanners to their own stasis pods, which were able to scan local species, like the two-legged predators they had become.

In return for his own questions, Shred pestered him about his own history, joining the Decepticons – or rather what made his designation as "Predacon" unique from them – and anything else her little brain could throw at him. He constantly minded his words, as he simply couldn't bear to bring the news that Cybertron had been destroyed to this little band of outsiders-gone-native. Thankfully, he managed to avoid it, and managed to verbally spew his experiences as a geochemist to fill the air between them.

Thrashclaw lead the little pack, and would occasionally send Slice out ahead to scout for ambushes. At one point, she reappeared in the thick undergrowth to inform them that "the herd" was moving east, and that they should take "the long way."

"What herd?" Fractyl inquired, his scientific curiosity piping up.

"A massive species of reptiles...we call them Tri-Horns," Thrash stated.

Fractyl mused thoughtfully, until a huge shape moved beyond the trees. It easily dwarfed them all in size, but it made no motion other than to lazily munch on the shrubbery around it, soft low groans echoing between it and the animals behind it, emitted through a large crest on its skull. Fractyl nervously looked at Thrash, who smirked.

"Big but harmless. Family group. We used to spook them because our forms are based on local predators. But they're used to us now, since we don't hunt them...well, not anymore," Thrash said with a glance at Gnash. She

cocked her head and looked away. Clearly the quiet one used to chase them for fun.

"She liked the noises they made, didn't ya?" Shred chirped, as she nudged Gnash with her snout. The green raptor got fed up with all the eyes on her and started wandering off, but not far from the pack.

"As far as we can tell, this planet is some sort of biological preserve," Thrash said, ducking under a low-hanging branch. "We've documented 400 species thus far, but their base biology doesn't match up with the local fauna the way we expected."

"So...these creatures may have been imported from another planet?" Fractyl posited, puzzling over the necessity of something like this.

"That's what we thought too!" Shred practically shouted as she dropped in front of Fractyl. He nearly fell over again, but could feel the judgmental gaze of Slice on his back. He regained composure quickly, and offered a new question. "So...any idea who? I mean, it'd take a massive amount of resources and technology to relocate a population that size, not to mention take them to a planet suitable for their survival."

"Probably something that wasn't Cybertronian," said Slice, and Fractyl was almost surprised that the statement didn't come laced with an insult. "We would have found a trace of them otherwise. All we have at the moment is the scattered energon deposits and a handful of grid patterns that may have once been isolation devices to keep the species apart."

"So...this is like some kind of zoo that got overrun?" Fractyl asked.

"A zoo, a park...'Bird-Lizard-Park' or something like that," Thrash said with an amused grin.

"Ugh, I've told you that is the worst," Slice snorted, rolling her eyes and stalking forward.

Thrash chuckled to herself and followed.

What kind of weird dinosaur commune have I gotten myself into? Fractyl thought.

Shred had spilled the beans on their backgrounds as they made their way up the small path leading to the plateau. Apparently, she was actually an Autobot, but had heard about the exploits of a duo of Decepticons with impressive beast modes, completely technological at the time of course. Shred had broken up the monotony of her day-to-day function in Iacon by monitoring Decepticon sub-frequencies. Mercenaries like Thrash and Slice were highly sought-after, and they had become popular on the secret forums and frequencies that 'Cons used, and Shred became a fan. She had sought them out, and basically begged to join.

"That's the short version," Thrash snidely commented with a hint of affection in her voice. "And Gnash?" Fractyl asked.

"....She's a long story, even in the short version," Slice said, not to anyone in particular. Gnash had picked up a stick and was gnawing on it like a Sharkticon.

Though Fractyl had revealed much about himself and how he crashed, he also kept a lot from his new compatriots. He didn't know how to break it to these ladies that Cybertron was as good as gone. And beyond that, he really didn't know if he could trust them. They DID save him, sure, but what was the purpose? His time as a Decepticon had soured his trust algorithms, and despite what Autobots tended to claim, he found it hard to believe that anyone would save another because it was "right" or "just."

After endless prattling from Shred that he was finally starting to get sick of, they had reached the far edge of the plateau. Standing in a large clearing of trees was the Velocity, a modestly-sized ship that still looked big enough to house a decently-sized crew.

"It doesn't look like you crashed...she's still space worthy?" Fractyl prodded.

"Of course. I'm not a terrible captain," Thrash said with a wink.

They were briefly scanned, and although Thrashclaw had to bypass their security to allow Fractyl inside...something he made a note of. Just in case.

Onboard, the ship was sleek and built for speed, like the exterior. The vessel had clearly been designed to be efficient, but the Raptoricons had made themselves at home. While there wasn't much for a tour, Fractyl did note one room through an open door, and was filled with trinkets and figures and posters. Yup, that's probably Shred's quarters, he thought.

On the bridge, Fractyl took leave to plop down on one of the command chairs, worn out from the last few cycle's more harrowing experiences. Thrash suddenly appeared at his side, clutching a pack of energon consumables in her jaw.

"Oh. Uh. Thanks!" Fractyl said awkwardly, and took them gratefully. As he took a bit of time to fuel up, he glanced over at Shred, who had nestled onto one of the seats herself, looking perfectly comfortable... for a robot wearing organic skin.

"...Do the lot of you...never transform?" he asked with nervousness in his throat. "Because I'm starting to get concerned that you're a bunch of talking beasts that killed the real crew and took their place.

Shred giggled. Slice looked at Thrashclaw, annoyed (as usual). Gnash didn't care (also as usual).

Thrash sighed.

"Here's the thing, Fractyl. We've been away from Cybertron for a LONG time. Like many of the exploratory vessels during the big expedition push megacycles ago, we went out to a primitive world to do some exploring," Thrash explained nonchalantly.

"....I thought you were mercenaries," Fractyl puzzled, officially confused.

"We were. Until...well..." Thrash started. Then Slice finished.

"Until none of your damn business."

Fractyl eyeballed Slice. He was starting to fear her less and grow more irritated. She eyeballed him right back and he was reminded why he should be afraid.

"The operative point," Thrash interjected, "is that we've basically made this planet our home. We keep tabs on what goes on, but for the most part, we like it here. And having these beast modes helps out there. We're taught back on Cybertron that organics are alien and unnatural..."

"But out here? Out here, you gotta' BE the beast, brother!" Shred piped up, and gave a playful squawk. Fractyl looked the room over. Shred had settled into a little ball on a command chair, Thrash had flexed her knees and gracefully balanced on her tail in a sitting position. Slice stood back behind Thrash and was pacing like a nervous predator, and Gnash was...chewing on something, bored with the conversation.

They seemed comfortable enough...but the idea was still so odd to Fractyl.

"So...what, do you...commune with the other beasts or something?"

"Sometimes. The DNA computer does a great job accessing the natural instincts of our chosen species. Makes it easier to integrate into the planet, and...it just feels better, you know?" Shred said, the last statement she simply allowed to hang in the air, as though Fractyl would understand intuitively. Which he didn't. But he didn't press the subject.

"Now that you're in our home, I think it's time you were honest with us," Thrashclaw said, standing and approaching the now-wary Fractyl. He looked at her with his trademark nervousness.

"Honest? Honest how?"

"You crashed. We know that. You claimed your ship malfunctioned. Easy enough. We plan to salvage your stasis pod. I trust you don't mind that," Thrash said with a directness that was new to Fractyl. He was starting to see her smooth, laid-back personality shed away, and an actual squad commander was starting to take form in front of him.

"I...suppose not...but why? If I may ask? Surely you have Stasis Pods of your own..."

"We're asking the questions now," Thrash said directly but not unkindly. "The REAL questions," she said as Shred piped up to object, as though to say "I was asking questions the whole way up here!"

Fractyl knew that he couldn't stall the truth about Cybertron much longer. There was an excellent chance that these were the only Cybertronians he was going to see for a good while yet. Maybe forever.

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The Raptoricons didn't get much of a chance to ask Fractyl any of the uncomfortable questions that he dreaded... because the proximity alarms starting shrieking.

ALERT. ALERT. MULTIPLE HOSTILES DETECTED. BASE INVASION IMMENINT.

All 5 robots immediately whirled about, as the computer screen lit up with an image of the ship, with multiple contacts appearing on the periphery.

"What the slagging-" Slice snarled angrily.

"Computer! How did they get so close without setting off our early warning systems?!" Thrash demanded.

UNKNOWN. POSSIBLE GUERRILLA TACTICS IMPLEMENTED.

"Guerrilla tactics?!" Shred asked incredulously.

"....Scrap. They must have burrowed under the ship," Thrash surmised.

"Who?!" Fractyl demanded. "What is happening?"

"It's the Vespoids," Shred said, clicking her talons against the floor. "They've tried stuff like this before," she nervously glanced at the readouts, "...but never with these numbers!"

"Something made them attack en masse..." Slice said, and she immediately turned to Fractyl and started stalking towards him. He, in turn, gave up any form of counter-intimidation.

"What? I didn't do anything!"

"Oh, we save YOU from one of their little parties, and now they're attacking our base? That's a little too convenient for comfort," Slice hissed as she bared her teeth at him. Fractyl was up against the wall, and looked over Slice's shoulder at Thrashclaw.

"Slice! Stand down!" Thrash said after a beat.

Showing remarkable obedience to her commanding officer, Slice backed away, her eyes still on Fractyl. But before he could relax, Thrash was suddenly in his space. This is still looking bad.

"It's still a pretty strong coincidence," she said, and a lump caught in Fractyl's vocal processor...

"They're tearing through the hull!" Shred said from one of the consoles.

Thrash whirled to the rest of the crew.

"Battle modes! Hit them with everything we've got!" she barked. Then she turned to Fractyl.

"We're not done with this...but if you don't want to be carved up, you've better get out there and kick some insectoid thorax."

"....Carved up by who? You or them?"

"That all depends," Thrash said, as she patted his metal cheek with a clawed hand. Next thing he knew, all 5 of them we bursting out of the main hangar.

Fractyl was already transformed, but he was about to see the Raptoricons in action, broad daylight and all.

"Raptoricons!" Thrash shouted, as the Vespoids popped out of the earth and from between the trees and scrambled down the top of the ship.

"Time to FOSSILIZE these chumps!"

Did she really just say tha-

Thrashclaw's body shifted, her raptor hide breaking away to reveal a lithe, powerful robot mode. Her raptor head became her right arm and her tail became the left. The spiked stilettos looked just as deadly as the rest of her, and her head flared with metal orange "feathers," mirroring her beast mode. Slice's head and winged arms became her shoulders, as her tail broke apart and became an impressive sniper-rifle/melee weapon. She was the tallest, her dark armor making her especially intimidating, even out of beast form. Shred technically "maximized" into a short, white-and-gold ball of power and energy, producing a double-ended, one-handed scythe and small blaster. Finally, Gnash, who roared a violent challenge, transformed into a rather grotesque creature, with distended limbs and a little too much exposed circuity and inner workings. But she emanated ferocity and power. Literally.

Fractyl produced his trusty plasma blaster, and knew

that the battle was about to get wild...but his sensors couldn't help but notice there actually was a surprising amount of energy emitting from Gnash. The quiet one wasn't just brimming with excess energon; his built-in geochemist sensory programs were picking up something much, much MORE.

No time for that, unfortunately, as Gnash was the first to jump into the battle. She began blasting green energy bursts from her maw, exploding against the ground and sending Vespoids flying. She crashed into a group of them, and began tossing them aside left-and-right. Thrash charged forward, whipping her tail and catching one Vespoid in the head, while chomping another with her hand-mouth. She tossed that one aside, while Shred began firing into the oncoming horde, chipping away at their armor. Slice began picking them off the roof from the ground with her rifle, until they started disappearing, using the ship itself as cover. Fractyl spotted a group towards the jungle that was about to start lobbing glowing red embers at the ship (some sort of primitive ranged weapon) and began firing at them. Even so, he was trying to count how many there were. Dozens surrounded the ship...and more were clawing their way up from underground.

The Raptoricons are brave, I'll grant them that, but they have no plan...they're all ferocity and thrive on the heat of battle, but there's no strategy here...

Several of the glowing red orbs fell to earth near Thrash and Shred, and they exploded with surprising force. The two managed to jump clear, with just a bit of singed feathers and armor to show for it.

"Slice!" Thrash called out, "Take out those bombardiers!"

Slice wordlessly complied.

"Fractyl! Make yourself useful and get those bugs off our roof!" Thrash commanded as she drove her heels into a Vespoid's carapace.

Finally, some tactics. It's almost as though they throw themselves into the fray at first, THEN come up with a plan. Definitely sounds like some Decepticons I know...

Fractyl activated his booster jets and was airborne. While he didn't have the same air control as when he was in jet mode, he could get to one direction or another, quickly and messily. He found himself quickly above the ship, spotting several scurrying Vespoids who had abandoned clawing into the hull. Fractyl zeroed in on the head of one in front of him...and fired. The blast caught the insect in the head, nearly removing it entirely...but it shrieked with what mouth it had left, and then it pointed at Fractyl and the others began producing those strange "bombs."

"THRASH!" Fractyl shouted, "How do you KILL these things?!"

"We've tried!" Thrash said, "But they don't feel pain and they don't go down easy! Just get them off the roof!"

He re-adjusted his aim and blasted Vespoid in the side of the thorax, sending it tumbling down the ship's side. The others shrieked and hurled their bombs at Fractyl.

He knew he could probably dodge them, but they might damage the ship or hit the Raptoricons below. So he

took careful aim and began blowing them out of the sky, the smoking, cinder-flaking objects popping with still-impressive force. As they geared for another volley, he popped two more off the ship, leaving only 3 more.

They don't feel pain...just anger and frustration. Fractyl admitted to himself that was a relief, even though his Predacon programming compelled him to slaughter them wholesale. He never reveled in destruction, just in following the orders handed down by like-minded officers. And working with Thrash was compellingly comfortable. She may have been more easy-going than the usual 'Con, but she had the fierceness and the edge that would have made the fiercest commander proud. He rapidly worked to pick off the last 3, even as an errant bomb hurtled past him.

"LOOK OUT BELOW!" he shouted, before turning back to blast the last of the Vespoids off the roof. He heard the explosion below, echoed by a loud, angry roar. Fractyl quickly flew back into view of the action below.

Slice had left her position and was bludgeoning a particularly large Vespoid soldier in the head with the end of her rifle. Thrash had just tossed Shred into a pack of the insects, and was hacking and kicking and punching and shooting her way through them. But Gnash...she was on the edge of the still-smoking crater created by the bomb that escaped his fire. She was staggering, but undamaged. Two Vespoids charged her, and she swatted them aside, blasting them again with more energy from her maw. Fractyl was relieved to see she wasn't in pieces, if only to avoid being eviscerated by Slice for his mistake. However, something...wrong started to happen. Gnash's previously flaring energy levels began fading. And it was starting to show. She was staggering again, struggling to move. It wasn't energon buildup. It was something else...the opposite of excess energon.

"Sssssss.....SISTER! Help.....Gnnnnnnaaaasssshhhh!" the green and silver robot roared in agony and fury, and she collapsed.

I was right...she IS damaged...some kind of malformed protoform? Fractyl didn't have time to wonder. The other raptors were too far away, and even though Shred was running full-on toward Gnash, Fractyl had to try and help as well. He boosted his jets to maximum speed and -

WHAM!

Something caught him in the back of the helmet. He went down, hard, and tumbled furiously against the dirt. He raised his head, his battle computer struggling to realign itself, and after wiping the dirt from his optics, he saw what hit him: a trio of large, winged Vespoids. Their fluttering wings settled as they landed around Gnash in a circle.

"SCRAP!" he heard Shred shout. The small former-Maximal ran and began firing, her plasma blasts bouncing off of the Vespoid's armor. Suddenly, another, large Vespoid burst from the ground and grabbed Shred, tossing her like a discus and smacking her against the ship. Thrash roared in anger but was caught by another one of the huge, warrior insects. While she fought that one off, the winged Vespoids each grabbed one of Gnash's limbs, and began to carry her off.

Fractyl aimed his blaster but he didn't have precision-aiming software. He could easily hit Gnash.

"SLICE! It's all you!" he called across the field.

Slice twirled her rifle and took steady aim...until it was snatched from her servos by yet another flying Vespoid,

and tossed into the jungle. She roared in anger at the insect, but another punched her in the side of the head while she was distracted. Thrash fired missile from her raptor-maw, detonating against the large warrior she had been fighting, and sending the creature scampering into the forest at surprising speed. The rest began fleeing as well.

No...they're not just retreating...they have what they came for, as Fractyl realized that Gnash must have been their target all along. But...why?

Thrash was knelt beside Shred, who was sparking from her joints. She took a bad hit, but would recover. Slice came pounding up beside them, the four Raptoricons and one Predacon reduced to minus-one ally.

"We have to go after her!" Shred exclaimed, clearly wounded, both figuratively and literally.

"You need a restoration chamber. I don't like the look of that dent," Thrash said, almost matronly.

"Don't worry about me! Go get-get-get-get-get-get-get-get-"

Her stutter was coming from the energon buildup running across her superstructure. Fractyl started noticing the same on himself and the other two raptors.

"Beast modes!" Thrash commanded, and the other complied quickly. Metal armor and grinding mechanics slid beneath synthetic techno-flesh, and the excess radiation was then being managed as additional radiation was shielded by their exostructures. Shred's transformation was especially difficult thanks to her injuries, but she managed to convert back to her flurry white dinosaur form.

"Can you walk?" Thrash asked.

"Yeah, no problem..." Shred said, clearly hurting from more than just a bent rotor.

"Good. Get inside and get repaired," Thrash said pointedly, and Shred saw that there was no room for argument.

"Slice, we're going after Gnash. Primus knows what they're doing to her. Fractyl?" she said, and his nosecone would have scrunched if it could. "You're with us. You tried to help, I know, but that bomb was your responsibility, which makes this your responsibility too."

Fractyl couldn't argue, but something was gnawing at him...

"Wait..." he said, and he reached into a small compartment that folded out of his Furmanite-infused armor.

"No time to wait, no time to argue, and no time for your Primus-begotten nervous ticks-" Slice began.

With a skillful pair of forceps that hinged free from his fuselage, he pulled out a fragment of green crystal, and dropped it on the ground.

"What the-" Slice said, competently confused.

"I picked this up from the alter when you lot saved me," Fractyl admitted. "I noticed something about it in my scanners. I'm a geochemist, after all, and I wanted to analyze it."

"What does that have to do with any-"

"LISTEN," Fractyl said, his hackles raised. "What do you know about Gnash? Her energy levels? Her protoform phase?"

"...We..." Shred began, despite the glares of Thrash and Slice. "We found her on this planet. We don't really know anything about her...other than that-"

"She's our sister," Thrash said, determination in her voice.

"I need more than that. Look, I've got a hunch, but I need access to your ship's computers. Do you have any lab equipment on board?"

"Some in the cargo, but we're not scientists-" Thrash started, and then Slice interrupted again.

"THIS LITERALLY DOES NOT MATTER. SHE IS GOING TO BE -"

"LOOK," Fractyl shouted back, "This is IMPORTANT! Go! Save your friend, but I have to figure something out that could be a big help here!"

"You're expecting us to leave you alone in our ship? Especially with Shred in stasis?" Thrash said, her feathers raising in a threat display.

"It's not that bad," Shred interjected. "My beast mode can fix it, even if it's more slowly. Besides, I can still snap his head off if I need to."

Fractyl looked at Shred somewhat incredulously, and then turned back to the other two.

"Yes. I'm asking you to trust me. Shred can stay and even help me. But yes, I do need your trust here."

"...And WHY is that?" Thrash said, her voice bordering on impatience.

"Because...Cybertron is GONE, ok? There. I said it."

The raptors stood in a brief silence. Shred's jaw hung open. Thrash and Slice looked stoic, but there was pain in their eyes.

"....Gone...as in...?" Thrash ventured.

"As in GONE gone. Destroyed. Wiped out," Fractyl said, his eyes flickering to the dirt.

"How-how in the name of the Covenant..." Slice said, hiding the anguish in her voice surprisingly well.

"Someone...or something, named Thunder Mayhem," Fractyl said, his reptilian eyes now burning. "I was trying to escape, along with as many bots as possible on as many ships as we could. Somehow we got shot down...maybe damage from the attack, maybe debris from Cybertron, but that's how I wound up here."

"So what you're saying is -" Thrash was putting the pieces together.

"We may be the last Cybertronians for hundreds of light years," Fractyl said, steeling his spark. "And right now, we're all we've got. No help is coming, and if we're in this together, we have to get along."

Thrash looked at Slice. Slice cocked her head slightly.

"That would explain why I hadn't been picking up any transmissions," Slice said. "I thought it was just an ion storm or something, but..."

"Look...look look look, Cybertron going boom or not, we've got to save our sister. And if our new brother thinks he can help, then we've got to take every chance!" Shred said, shaking off the shock like mites from her feathers, even though Fractyl suspected she was hurting even more in her spark. But purpose could galvanize them into action, which was better than despair.

"Like I said, go after your girl," Fractyl said, perking up. "We'll be right behind you, quick as we're able."

Thrash and Slice hesitated for a moment, then Thrash indicated to her tall, dark sister to head off in front of her, then turned to her tiny, fluffy soldier.

"If he does anything stupid, put his spark on the mantle," she quipped, and ran off into the jungle.

Fractyl turned to Shred, and confidently puffed up his chest.

"Now where's that science-y scrap?"

*****

Less than an hour later, Shred and Fractyl had set up a make-shift lab in one of the cargo bays, hooked up to the Velocity's computer. Fractyl had gathered three things – the shards of the green crystal, a severed limb of a Vespoid, and the data records from Gnash's visits to the restoration chamber.

"So, tell me again, what have you noticed with Gnash's energy output?" Fractyl asked, as his robot mode leaned over a microscope.

"Just that it's off the charts. She's the strongest of us all, but ever since we found her in that broken-down lab on this planet, she's never really been...quite right," Shred said while perched on a large container, just above Fractyl's eye line.

"I take it she was damaged in her protoform phase? I've seen that happen," Fractyl said as he broken down the frag-

ment into its base components.

"Maybe...I mean, we sometimes have to reign her in when she gets upset, but we always take time for her. And she can be just the sweetest when she's calm and happy."

"I've heard of that too. But the energy output is what bothers me," Fractyl said as he adjusted his scanners.

"Like Thrash said, we're not scientists. We knew that she was different...but it's not like we really care. She's always been there for us."

"But she uses the restoration chamber more than any of you," Fractyl said, "so her energy's run low like that before?"

"Yeah, I mean, we give her energon and she goes in the chamber, and she's ok for a while. But this was the fastest it's ever happened," Shred said sheepishly, as though she started to realize that they hadn't been properly caring for their sister.

"I know you're doing your best," Fractyl said. "She's lucky to have you all."

"Well, mostly just lucky to have me," Shred said, somewhat jokingly. "I mean, I had to convince Thrash and Shred to bring her on. To take care of her. We couldn't just leave her where we found her, but..."

"But?"

"Well...we were on a job. From a big underground syndicate on Cybertron," Shred said cautiously.

"A job? What kind of job?" Fractyl said, looking up for the first time since he started working.

"Yeah...we were told to track this particular energy signal, but we didn't know what it was or what it meant. Just that it was a job...and then..."

"Then you found Gnash," Fractyl said, the puzzle pieces sliding into place for him.

"She was activated when we entered the lab, and she took to us right away!" Shred said. "She really thinks of us as a family... and we knew that the Kolkular Powerbase couldn't have her... or her strength."

"I take it Thrash and Shred had been looking to sever ties with the syndicate anyway?" Fractyl ventured.

"They were sick of their scheming and creepy faces. So when we came to this planet, we decided to stick around. There was plenty of energon, and if we needed to, we could take off whenever we wanted... except now I guess..." Shred's head drooped, clearly she was thinking of Cybertron. Fractyl tried to shake her out of it.

"Dwelling on it won't help," he said with a sigh. "We have to keep working. I think I've figured something out... I just have to-"

Fractyl energized a small fragment of natural energon, and there was a definite reaction with the green crystal.

"By the Matrix!" he exclaimed.

"What?! What is it?" Shred said, her curiosity overtaking her somber attitude.

"It's energon! The green crystal is energon!"

"What are you talking about?!" Shred said. "We can't fuel up on that stuff...we already tested it with the ship!"

"Ah, but that was before you had a geochemist on board!" Fractyl said proudly. "It's definitely a variety I've never encountered before! You said this stuff sometimes forms around natural energon?"

"In some of the mines that we've uncovered," Shred said, trying to be helpful. "But the stuff is kinda rare. And the Vespoids love it. Not sure why, but they use it to make weapons and armor and I even think they eat it..."

Fractyl then grasped the insect limb, and began scanning it, sampling its DNA. He ran a scan of it as well, and then...

"Primus below!" he gasped. "This green energon is in their blood! More than that....it's a part of their DNA!"

"Are you serious?!" Shred exclaimed. "Wait...what does that have to do with...."

Shred's eyes went wide, as she was reaching the same conclusion Fractyl had already reached and was sailing past.

"Quick! Get me a scan of the area! I'll upload the energy signature into the database. We may have a solution to all of this!"

*****

Thrash and Slice stood at the hilltop overlooking the Vespoid hive. It was a series of ancient, gigantic trees that had been formed into something of a city, surrounding a massive sinkhole, within which lay the core of the insect's nest. Thrashclaw and Slice stood far to the out edges of the forest, overlooking the low valley in which the hive lay.

"Slice? Suggestions?" Thrash said, her second-in-command eying the city intensely. Her optics were adjusted for sniping and stealth combat, so, naturally, she could see and detect hundreds of life forms and subsequent variables at once.

"They know we're here," she said in a deadpan voice.

"...I suppose that's not unexpected," Thrash said, placing a clawed foot on a large room and raising her eye line partially. Even with her slightly less refined optics, she could see movement towards the outer rim of the "village."

"They definitely have some kind of early warning system that we probably didn't even think to look for," Slice added, her body language betraying nothing except the tap-tap-tap of her claws against the stones beneath her feet. "Primitives are just full of surprises."

Based on the limited research they had been able to do on their hostile locals, the Raptoricons knew at least a handful of elements regarding their insectoid neighbors. For one, they were not a hivemind in the strictest sense. While they share a mutual emotional wavelength, perhaps telepathic in nature, they were not without individuality or personal agency. They simply felt each other at all times, and were aware of the intent of all around them. Therefore, they could be said to be a society that ran on empathy. But after the Raptoricons arrived, they had become immediately hostile. When Thrashclaw made the decision that the group would stay, they had attempted to make contact with the natives whom they had made strained efforts to avoid back when the mission was to simply infiltrate a planet filled with prehistoric lifeforms from Earth, obtain whatever goody the Kolkular Powerbase was so hot and bothered over, and extract as silently as they had arrived. Granted, plans change and fate takes a hard left-turn once every few cycles.

The Vespoids must have had some form on contact with Cybertronians even before the Raptoricons, because the ferocity with which they dealt the newcomers was swift and decidedly monstrous. Though the Cybertronians couldn't understand what they had done to offend the natives, they thought it best to steer clear of them. Of course, that didn't stop the two factions from colliding every now and again. This lead to another discovery: the Vespoids don't feel pain in the way that vertebrate lifeforms do. Even after witnessing several of the insects being trampled in a stampede of startled Long-tails, those same poor creatures wrenched themselves up either under their own power or with the help of their fellows, and retreated to either regrow their limbs or become food for their larvae.

For a naturalist from Cybertron, the entire ecosystem of the planet would have made a fascinating subject for megacycles of research. But the Raptoricons weren't scientists; they were warriors. And today was all-out war.

"Running in there, jaws open, would probably be suicide," Thrash said, nonplussed.

"I could try and pick off their scouts, but with their armor and their numbers..."

Thrash noted that there were probably close to a solid hundred or more soldiers forming a protective barrier between them and their goal... which itself was unclear. Where could Gnash be? How could they find her without anyone hurting her? It was an ugly situation...

"...Every moment that passes puts Gnash's life in greater danger," Thrash said in a decisive tone. Slice looked at her. The two had known each-other for megacycles upon megacycles. They were almost always in-tune with each-other's thoughts. Each hard won battle and each mission, whether it succeeded or failed, brought them closer together. They relished in battle, foolish or otherwise, and while they had confidence that they could handle a few hundred measly Vespoids...they had never attempted a direct assault on the native species' home base. There was no telling what was in there.

Thrash and Slice made eye contact once more, then the commander nuzzled her most trusted soldier...her friend.

"Half as long..." Thrash said softly.

"Twice as bright," Slice responded, her own soft voice tinged with resolve.

The jungle line exploded as blurs of blue, orange, black, and yellow bolted across the plain of trees that had been cut down to serve the hive. The Vespoids howled in challenge, and winged, armored, and foot soldier varieties charged at the two lone raptors.

The two shot a quick glance at each-other, their Decepticon programming and beast instincts roared with delight. The elation of combat was upon them!

Thrash launched herself skyward over the first few Vespoids to charge at her. They were too slow for her on the ground. Extending her claws and teeth, she latched onto a flying Vespoid which bucked and hissed at her, trying to tear at her techno-flesh. She shrieked in its face and twisted hard, slamming the insect into one of its fellow fliers. She then dropped onto the head of another, snapping its neck, and then clawed the arms off of another Vespoid, which cursed in frustration, something that made battle with these creatures much easier. Even as a hardened Decepticon assassin, Thrashclaw still did not care for the agony of her prey. She preferred brave, valiant fighters...the way her mentor back on Cybertron used to.

That brown and blue, thick-headed, dynamic bot, she thought fondly as she roundhouse-kicked an armored Vespoid's lower mandibles off. I hope he didn't get in too much trouble with that purple lunatic.

Slice rammed her head into an oncoming train of chitinous armor and clawed digits, and managed to lift one clear into the air and tail-whip the combatant behind it. She was making short work of the aliens in beast mode, but...

"THRASH!" Slice called out to her commander. "We're not clearing the way fast enough!"

"Then we'll have to bust out the bug spray!" Thrash hollered back.

The two raptors shifted their forms, plates and servos and internal motors and mech-fluid all working in harmonious unison with their transformation cogs to shift their bodies into their powerful robot modes. Though their beast modes were faster, and in some cases stronger, and built perfectly for the untamed wilderness, there was no competing with the raw firepower of their robot modes. Even if the energon fields shorted out their superstructures, they could switch back to beast mode and continue hitting hard and fast. For the moment, though, it was time to unleash hellfire.

Thrash hurtled a Veloci-Missile at a large group of heavily armored Vespoids much closer to the edge of the deep, mile-wide hole that formed the entrance of the nest. Slice shifted her rifle to rapid-fire mode and began mowing the soldiers down, limbs and armor and gooey ichor flying. Many of the bugs began retreating, scampering up the gargantuan, building-sized trees that circled the hole. Others fought on, dive-bombing and swinging their bladed weapons.

That's odd... Thrash found herself thinking... where are the bombardiers? They should have been pelting us with those by now. It's almost like they're not fighting hard enough...like whatever passes for hearts isn't in this...

The thought was briefly upsetting to Thrashclaw, but they couldn't let up. They were almost at the hole... almost at their goal.

Then, as Thrash grabbed a soldier with her raptor-maw and tossed him aside, she got her first look straight down into the dark, massive chasm.

And nearly fell backwards.

Thousands of lights peppered the darkness which even the fading sun couldn't illuminate anymore...and she realized that they weren't lights... they were eyes. Thousands upon thousands of them, all moving, all shuffling, all creeping, crawling, and making their way topside.

Thrash backed up, her resolved shaken. Suddenly, she bumped into something. Turning her head to fight, she realized it was Slice, who had been firing at the waves of regrouping Vespoids.

"I think we may be in over our heads," Thrash said, her lips curled into a smile that betrayed her apprehension.

"When has that ever stopped us?" Slice said, smiling for the first time in days.

"Well...a few hundred up here, a few thousand down there..." Thrash peeked over the edge again, and the lights were definitely moving upwards towards the surface. Like an army of ants from the Pit itself.

"Hold on to your butt, Slice," Thrash said, re-loading her Veloci-Missile.

A sharp, echoing cry cut through the din created by the warring factions. In a natural motion befitting their evolution, the Vespoids all looked up in unison at...something in the far sky, just below the line of the ancient, hollowed-out trees that formed the citadel around them. It was a tremendous, glittering green object, being held aloft by...

"I literally don't believe it," Thrash said, while Slice's metallic jaw practically hit the dirt. It was a flock of flying reptiles, one of the local species, long of wingspan and pointed of beak and crest, each one tethered to a long rope. Almost a dozen of them, and the ropes held aloft a huge net, filled to the brim with green crystals.

"Hey, didn't we make that for when we needed to haul in that salvage?" Slice ventured, pointing at the crude tool that she and the others had made while foraging the wilderness for supplies and alternative fuel sources.

Thrash suddenly spotted the tiny ball of white fluff that perched atop the haul of green crystals.

"Vespoids young and old!" Shred called down as the leathery fliers circled slowly, lowering the net.

"Who's hungry?!"

The insects cleared a spot for the haul of green minerals to land, and the beasts landed less-than-gracefully among the hordes of insects. Thrash and Slice pushed their way to the scene, all hostilities forgotten for the moment.

"Shred?! What the ever-loving-Pit-"

"Surprise!" Shred squawked, "we're here and we brought a peace offering!"

"A....a WHAT?" Thrash said, incredulously.

"Well, the short version is -" the nearest flying creature, a leathery animal of green and mottled-gold hide said to Thrash, who took a step back in shock.

"F...Fractyl?!" she and Slice literally couldn't believe it!

"Fractyl's a geochemist right?" Shred began, unconcerned with the stupor on her sisters' faces. "So he looked at the green crystals because his sensors are tuned to special geological energies so then figured out that the Vespoids also have the same minerals in their bodies, so then he discovered that this stuff like a weird biomass-infused energon that even organics can live on and that might even be why the Vespoids are so evolved compared to other invertebrates so anyway he set the scanners on the ship to look for the green stuff – which we never looked for because we only use regular energon and not this weird green stuff – so then he found a giant natural vein running right through our plateau which means we've been parked on a huge supply of the stuff these folks have been needing for a long time and we had no idea! So I pulled that big net out of storage and we loaded up as much as we could – sorry it took so long but it was a lot of work – and now here we are!"

All the other life forms in the area stood dumbfounded. Thrash finally shook off the stunning information dump.

"But what about this?!" she gestured to Fractyl.

"Oh? Well the net was still in good condition and it was strong enough to carry the green crystals, which aren't that heavy -"

"No, you bird-brain! THIS!" she pointed at him, in his fancy new beast mode, and then to the nearest flier, who was nervously pecking its hide and not enjoying being the center of attention.

"Oh...uh...well...I knew we needed help transporting this mineral," Fractyl said, somewhat ashamed, "and I recalled what you said about beast instincts and the organic tech and wanted to try it for myself and..."

Thrash and Slice gaped at him.

"Yeah! And I told him about that colony of swoopers at the edge of the cliff, and he went and pretty much talked

to them!" Shred said breathlessly.

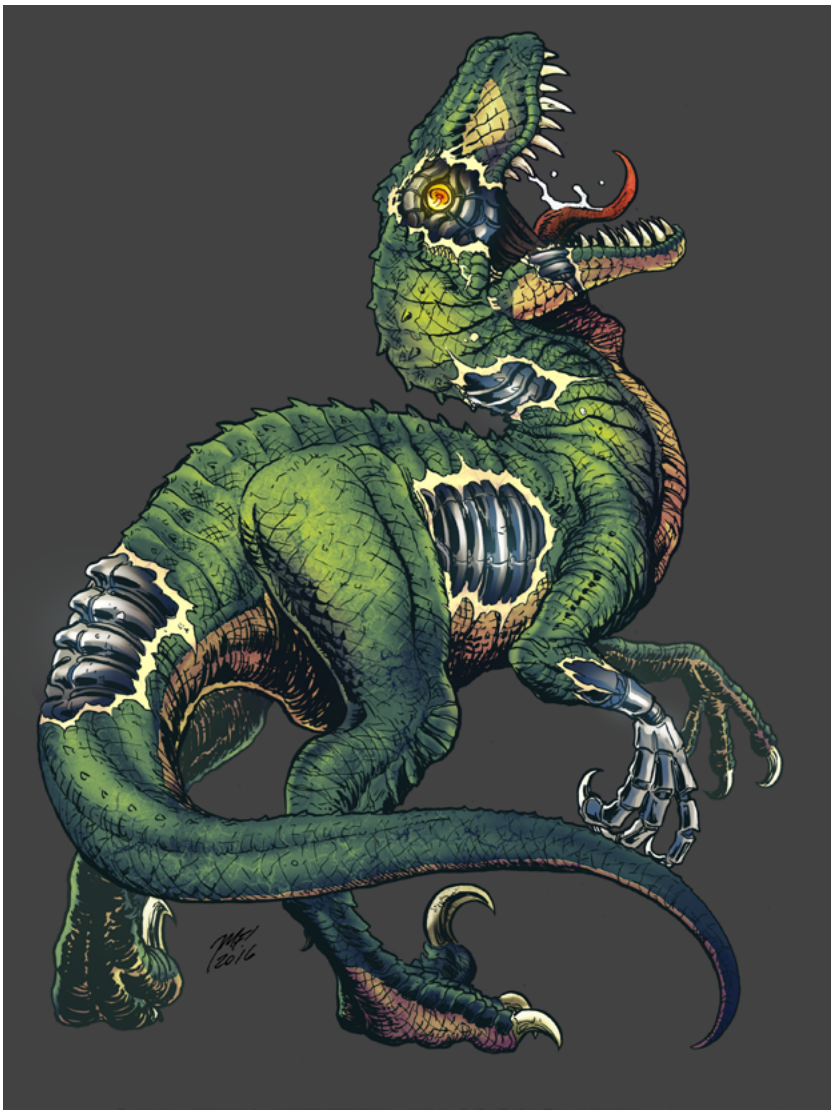
"Oh, that reminds me," Fractyl turned and squawked at the other "swoopers," and they each squawked in response, and began to take off back towards the plateau.

"By the by, I hope you know how to fish, because I promised them a week's worth," Fractyl said somehow grinning with that huge beak.

"But that's not all of it: wait till we tell you about Gnash!" Shred exclaimed, and then everyone's eyes went wide.

"SCRAP! What about Gnash?!" Thrashclaw said, and began angrily darting her eyes back and forth, suddenly reminded of the collection of unmoving Vespoids they were just fighting mere moments ago.

"Me am Gnash!" a familiar, raspy voice called from behind the crowd. The insects parted as the gruff looking shaman, the one who had kidnapped Fractyl when he first arrived, shuffled into view. And at his side was none other than Gnash! Aside from her trademark missing skin patches, she looked none the worse for wear.



"GNASH!" Shred shouted and bounded up to her sister, and the two nuzzled in elation.

"But...but...how did...why" Slice said, her hand still on her rifle.

"That's the most surprising thing – I think Gnash runs on the same green energon that the Vespoids do!" Fractyl said. Thrashclaw turned back towards him, still flabbergasted.

"You found her in a lab, right? I don't think that she was just damaged in her protoform phase...I think she was an active experiment. She carried the same energy signature as the green energon and the Vespoids. So perhaps they considered her some kind of kin? Maybe they were trying to see how Cybertronians could be so like them? Either way, I figured a big display of goodwill would maybe work better than a war... I've always left the fighting to others... And I didn't think the odds would ever be in your favor," Fractyl said, shuffling his clawed feet.

"Gnash feel better! Bugs give Gnash green stuff! Green stuff make Gnash strong!" the powerful raptor said, stomping her feet excitedly.

"Then, this whole time..." Thrash began to say, "we were trying to give her pure energon, and it could have killed her?"

"Of course not," Fractyl said, helpfully. "It wasn't that the energon was harming her, but she needed the green crystal's biomass mixture to even out her energy levels."

Thrashclaw looked at him with both realization and deep appreciation in her eyes.

"Hey..." Fractyl said, embarrassed. "Like I said, she's lucky to have you."

Thrashclaw turned around, saw the wounded and injured warriors, devoid of pain but not of bravery and strength. She considered for a moment, then walked over to the pile of green minerals. She grasped a handful, and tossed it to the nearest Vespoid. It caught the rock, and held it aloft, emitting a loud, buzzing call in their strange tongue. The other joined in, making a strange symphonic noise that echoed through the valley. Once it quieted down, the insects began to file towards the pile, bowing before it, and graciously taking chunks of the mineral, passing it down to the pit, where it would be stored for food and tools. And for that moment, all was right with the world.

Fractyl looked around, and felt something he didn't often get to experience: pride. For the first time in a long while, he had done something right. Autobot or Decepticon, it didn't really matter in this moment. He had done well, and no Megatron from any timeline could take that away from him. Just as he was beginning to feel like he might be right at home on this new world, a series of bright lights lit up the sky. Vespoids scattered, clearing back to the sides of the huge trees and the lip of their yawning chasm. The Raptoricons gathered around him, unsure of what to do but their solidarity with him made him feel braver, more confident towards whatever would happen.

*****

The ship was definitely Cybertronian. Smaller than the Velocity, and much more well-worn and considerably beaten up. It engaged hovering thrusters and began to settle towards the ground, kicking up dust like a storm. Shielding their optics and their vents, the small group of outcasts faced whatever was going to come out of the ship, and once the dust settled, there was a silence. It continued for what seemed like agonizing deca-cycles, until the hatch on the underside began to shift loudly. Fractyl and the Raptoricons ground their heels into the dirt, prepared for whatever was about to come out.

A massive, hulking form began to stomp out of the ship, a loud clanging ring with each metallic footstep. As Fractyl's optics adjusted, he could make out the boxy shape of the Cybertronian. A tall fin on its head, purple and yellow painted armor, one hand replaced by a wicked-looking blade.

"IMPACTOR?!" Fractyl gasped in total shock. The Raptoricons gaped at Fractyl, then at Impactor, then Fractyl again. The Vespoids slowly began gathering around, nervously chittering and grasping their weapons tight. The hulking armored Wrecker scanned the area, cocked an eyebrow, and then lifted his one good hand, palm out, in a neutral greeting.

"Bah-weep-granah-weep-nini-bong," he said, a smirk on his face.

EPILOGUE

Fractyl stepped out of the reformatting chamber, feeling refreshed and energized. He was out of his Beast Warrior body and back with his jet-plane alternate mode, only fitted with a few nice upgrades thanks to Counterpunch, who sat at the helm of the ship.

"Hm...kind of a shame to be rid of ol' leatherwings. I feel like I was just getting to know that form," he muttered to nobody in particular.

"Trust me, where we're going," Impactor said, as he appeared from behind Fractyl, startling him, "you'll want more thrust than flapping."

Fractyl nodded, not quite understanding, but he glanced out of the window at the quickly receding planet beyond. After Impactor and Counterpunch arrived, they told Fractyl that his distress beacon was never deactivated from his stasis pod, and while they looked for survivors, they saw the ruckus being caused by Cybertronian energy signatures; Thrash and Slice in their robot modes. Once everything calmed down, Impactor brought out a much more advanced universal translator he had acquired on Paradron that allowed the Cybertronians to communicate more comfortably with the Vespoids, and they were granted an audience with the massive, undulating, grotesque, but extremely charitable and welcoming Queen of the Vespoids. It was here that the Raptoricons were able to form a truce with the Vespoids, providing the insectoids access to the "Greenergon" mine (Shred's idea) beneath the plateau, while trading for a relatively small amount to be used as fuel for Gnash. As well as a sizable sample that they allowed Fractyl to secure for future studies.

When Fractyl asked the ladies if they wanted to join Impactor and Counterpunch in looking for survivors, they declined.

"Thanks, but we're pretty much good here," Thrashclaw had said simply and directly.

"But if you're ever in the neighborhood, I bet we could find a use for a pterodactyl-whisperer!" Shred chirped.

"Gnash like Fractyl!" the green dinosaur squawked at him, and embraced him in her rough, but not unwelcomed manner.

"...You did good, Flappy," Slice said, and Fractyl had never felt more proud.

"You think they'll be alright down there?" the Predacon said, back in the present and still looking out the viewing port.

"I'm sure life will find a way," Counterpunch called back over his shoulder, "even weird beasty-Cybertronian-bug-life."

"You managed to keep from getting torn limb-from-limb on that Primus-forsaken rock," Impactor said gruffly. "Guess we could use a 'Con like you."

"I think I've got another signal, boss," Counterpunch called from the helm before Fractyl could question the statement.

"Lock in on it," Impactor ordered, sitting at the captain's chair. "We've got a lot of work left to do."

"You...still haven't told me exactly what we're doing. I mean, I appreciate the help for a lowly geochemist like me, but -"

"We're taking him down," Impactor said, grimly. "Us and any other survivors we can find out here."

"...Taking down who?" Fractyl said, already dreading the answer.

"Thunder...slagging...Mayhem."

END