Open Spaces

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Summary

The Autobots have done the impossible and won the war. While they argue over what to do with their enemies, Optimus hopes to offer his people a better solution.
Chapter One

Part One: aphelion

Optimus searched the faces of his people for answers as they argued and debated and came close to blows; Brawn, Ironhide and Cliffjumper were viciously arguing with the aerialbots while First Aid, Ratchet and Wheeljack huddled together, words furious and quiet. Others - Mirage, Hound, Hoist and Grapple, several Protectobots - were silent, watching those around them without offering input. The Ark was full of bitter and righteous Autobots, and down below in the holding cells the Decepticons were no doubt feeling something similar.

The only point of difference, of course, was that the Decepticons had little control over what would happen.

"Don't be so stupid, Bee, the Cons would probably have us all executed - "

"Well that's not the point, we're supposed to be better than them!"

" - don't deserve better - "

"They're not some hive mind, I mean, some of them are pretty alright -"

"Damn kids, don't know what you're talkin' about, just because the seekers might wave at ya sometimes doesn't mean scrap - "

"That's not fair, we fought this war too!"

"Why not spark prison, at least it's better than execution?"

"That's worse, we can't just keep them disembodied forever."

"Well we can't keep them in cells forever either! They'd break out!"

Optimus winced. His spark twinged, rippling with an ache of unknown origin. He stood and instantly found himself with the attention of too many people looking for command, for guidance. "I need a moment. Please don't start fighting."

Ratchet and Wheeljack exchanged looks as their leader stepped out into the hallway, radiating concern.

First Aid couldn't quite hold his tongue. "Is Optimus alright? He didn't seem well."

Instead of a proper answer, Ratchet ordered them both to stay and left after the Prime.

"Eh... don't worry. He's probably just stepping out for a bit of quiet. I know I would."

The Protectobot propped his head on his hand, sighing. "You're a bad liar, Wheeljack. Do you think Optimus will do it?"
"What?"

"Have the Decepticons all killed."

This, at least, elected a more honest response; the inventor flinched and looked away, scanning the bickering Autobots. "I dunno, Aid. Maybe."

"Do you think he should?"

To his annoyance, the question got him nothing beyond "I'll do what Optimus says, he knows what's right," no matter how much he pried.

Optimus crossed over to an empty room, one of the few used for excess equipment storage. The faint pain in his spark had graduated to an outright throbbing ache, and to his concern it seemed to be focused towards the front. Catches released, and dim blue light flooded the small room. Cool, stale air flushed between lamina and joint casings, the heat of the Matrix and his lifeforce forced into contact with Earth's atmosphere.

He placed his hands on the Matrix, fingertips to the shell edges. Distantly, there were voices; words saturated with vengeance, with rage, urging him to choose execution. A soft, rolling voice offers the potential for the Decepticon sparks returning to the Well, to be reborn again, their anger and suffering (their history) wiped away for a second chance. Someone begs, with clear desperation, for him to place them in spark prison until they gutter out on their own, gives warnings of martyrdom. Voices he has never known, the presence of leaders past imprinted on his spark, all fade and grow in volume as he sinks deeper into communion. Kill them, hurt them, forgive them, take them - his body shuddered under the emotional toll, of poisonous thoughts he would never have.

The burning dissipates as his mind clears, becoming his alone once more. The ache is gone, and his interlocking plates fold together.

Ratchet hovered outside the storage room, wondering at the soft blue glow that peeked out from the seams of the doorway. They'd thought that was what Optimus had been doing, but hypotheticals and knowing your leader was communicating with past Matrix holders was a little different. The distant, little known Primon, said to be a figure of eternal contemplation and the reconstructed Prima, who was said to be the first to strike out against the Quintessons, might offer practical advice. He knew even less of Prime Nova; he fought and died in the Quintesson wars. Guardian Prime, barely fit to fight, had been killed quickly. Then came the infamous Zeta; while Sentinel had been egotistical and a braggart, Zeta had taken his possession of the Matrix as his right to all Cybertronians, in whatever ways he wished. One of the early military trained Autobots, his proclivity for battle had translated into sadism after his ascension. If there was one decent act Megatron ever did, it had been killing Zeta Prime.

He hoped Optimus doesn't listen to his voice too closely.

The door slid open; Prime strode out, looking much more determined than when he had left. "Find what you needed?"

"I have made my choice. Now, I only need the others to agree to it."

The medic shrugged, relieved to find he wasn’t being asked for advice. "They'll follow you."
"You say that now, but I doubt you'll be as confident when you hear what I have to say. Let's go, old friend."

They entered together and Ratchet quickly retook his seat next, hoping to avoid any backlash from the Prime's words. Although he would support whatever the decision turned out to be, the strangely knowing tone in which Optimus had offered his warning worried him. Optimus would never be cruel if he could help it.

"Do you trust my judgement in this matter?" He asked, carefully scanning the room so he briefly caught every optic. They quieted for a moment, startled, and then called out their agreements and loyalty to him. "Then believe me when I say that this is the best possible choice I can make, and - wait for me to finish before you voice your disapproval."

There was a nervous shifting about as mechs exchanged uneasy glances. "We will return to Cybertron, with our Decepticon prisoners. We know their crimes, so trials are unnecessary. Our planet needs to be rebuilt, and we cannot do it alone. However..." he paused, gazing at some unknown point above their heads, and Ratchet felt anxiety twist his spark. "I know the Decepticons cannot be trusted. But long before the war, our planet lived under the guidance of unkind rulers. The movement that rose against those rulers eventually became the Decepticons. They have committed terrible crimes - but so have we. So... I propose..." his words slowed momentarily with uncertainty. "The Decepticons will be our responsibility; we will, during the reconstruction of our planet, keep them as our wards - not as servants - until they accept the war has come to a close and can be trusted to work alongside us."

Silence was held for a single, perfect moment.

Then it shattered into a howling roar as Autobots jumped to their feet, shouting to make their voices heard.

"Are you fragging joking - "

"No! Absolutely no way! How would that even work?"

"They'd kill us in our sleep, Optimus, really - "

" - supposed to just let them off the hook for all the destruction and - "

Bluestreak's voice, several decibels louder than usual, split through the din. "SHUT UP!"

Prowl gaped at him in shock, and several more were openly glaring at him, but Bluestreak could hardly keep quiet. "You're being a bunch of idiots! Get over yourselves! If Optimus says this is the best idea, then it is! And - I mean - do you really want to just kill all of them, when they can't even defend themselves, or lock them away forever? That's messed up and - and even if... " his voice trailed off his scowl melted away into a look of unease. Bluestreak sunk down into his seat. "Even if they do deserve it. Even if they deserve worse. We should be better than that."

There was a long, uncomfortable moment, before Ironhide - to Ratchet's shock - sighed and stood up. "Fine. Fine. I'll vote for it. But only 'cause Optimus said it's a good idea. I don't like the idea of having a buncha Cons around, but... well. Fine."

"This is so stupid," Cliffjumper announced, less angry and more confused. "I'm not the only one who thinks this is stupid, right? I mean - what's to keep them from straight up murdering us while we're in recharge? Or breaking out?"

"I understand your concerns, but we can find ways around that, Cliffjumper. Humane ways."
Optimus looked at Ratchet and Wheeljack, and if his expression was a bit too hopeful to inspire confidence, they weren't going to bring it up.

Wheeljack nodded. "Yeah. We can design doors that'll only open for the Autobot who lives there, reinforce windows... same for private rooms. We'd have to be careful, but it can be done."

"I agree," Hoist announced, rather suddenly. "We don't know how many bots are gonna make it back - if there are any other bots - and we can't rebuild Cybertron entirely on our own. At least the Constructicons know what they're doing, and having more hands will help, even if they don't know much."

"I would like to point out," a previously silent Skyfire said, "that Starscream used to be scientist, and that several others are well studied in various areas - Mixmaster, for example. They can contribute as more than just manual labor."

"We are all gonna die," Huffer said.

Bumblebee piped up, doing his best to sound optimistic. "Come on, Huffer! Some of them are pretty, well, alarming but there are a few who aren't so bad... we've worked together in the past, here and there..."

"Can we have responsibility of the seekers? Please?" Silverbolt interjected, looking terribly young for someone who wanted to be in charge of rehabilitating flying terrorists.

"One moment - Skyfire?" The other turned, looking just as solemn and calm as ever. "Would you be alright with taking care of the head trine?"

"Yes," Skyfire said, stubbornly ignoring the incredulous staring.

"I thought so. Silverbolt - I think it's best if we made sure the Autobots who want to do this are matched up with Decepticons who are at least somewhat mutually suited to one another. Skyfire has a past with Starscream and I don't think splitting up any of the trines would be a good idea."

"Scrap," Perceptor exclaimed. "Optimus. What about the gestalts? One bot can't take care of a whole gestalt."

"And Soundwave and his casseticons should stay together," Blaster added. "Whoever gets them should make sure they don't have any vents going into their rooms."

"Alright, what about the bad Cons? The really violent or unstable ones? Scrap, Vortex and Wildrider alone - "

"The gestalts should stay together," Optimus insisted. "Multiple mechs will share the responsibility of a gestalt team, so anyone considering it should be aware they'll have to share an apartment with several others."

Bluestreak raised his hand. "I volunteer for the Stunticons."

"Bluestreak, no!" Prowl cried, horrified.

"Why not? I can take care of myself well enough, and besides, they're pretty young, right?"

"We'll see. It might be better to match gestals to gestals, but since we only have a few teams..." Optimus trailed off. "He's not going to like it, but I'll have to talk to Megatron. Even if he refuses to cooperate, the others might be more amenable. Remember, this is not mandatory - no one will be
forced to room with a Decepticon if they don't want to. That means, however, that we'll have to make due with low numbers of volunteers. Take the time you need to reach whatever decision you feel is best. Now, if no one else has any questions, this meeting is adjourned."

Jazz gave a low whistle, the beginnings of a sympathetic smile on his face. "Wooo boy. Good luck with that, Prime." He turned to Prowl, gently nudging him with his hip. "And you too. Blue doesn't look like he plans on letting anyone stop him."

"I'll have to have a talk with him," Prowl replied, looking like so many young guardians before him about to take a stab at corralling their rambunctious newbuilds. Somehow, Jazz doubted it would be an easy argument to win.

In the belly of the Ark laid enough cells to hold every single Decepticon on Earth, and then some. This was not the original intent of the area, as they had been simple private rooms, but practicality was a harsh mistress and several bots had agreed that an actual holding area was needed. As much as many imagined their great war coming to end on the battlefield, the sparks of their enemies extinguished in honorable(ish) combat, the awkward latticework of schemes, trickery, and occasional kill-them-no-wait-pull-your-punches-no-wait-retreat game rendered that outcome unlikely. Those involved were more likely to be kidnapped, plagued by temporary amnesia, or come together for common goals before being backstabbed and promptly abandoned rather than killed.

No. Although it forced several of them to room together, they all figured out rather quickly that they needed somewhere to hold the Decepticons, should they actually manage to catch and keep a few.

Megatron had been quickly shuffle-carried into the first cell, deep in recharge - although it was not a willing recharge. Repeated blows to the helm did that, even to a heavily armored military build. They'd left Soundwave on the other end of the room, and Starscream in the middle, in the vain hope that it would prevent easy plotting. The full energon shield on Soundwaves cell, rather than the simple bars, ensured the cassetticons weren't going anywhere. The other Decepticons filled out the rest of the cells, gestalts split up to prevent combining, and it seemed most of them were in the business of glaring and sulking.

He supposed he couldn't blame the Stunticons for their behavior; they were fairly young.

"Megatron."

The Decepticon leader was reclining on his recharge slab, clearly awake but not deigning to make optic contact. He kept his voice low and calm, but didn't bother trying to keep his words quiet, knowing the cavernous space would carry them to every Decepticon present.

"I have come to speak with you about the fate of your mechs."

"Come to gloat about our impending execution, you mean? I expect it will be public. Or maybe you've come with the offer of spark prison for the truly repentant." His words grew poisonous at the end, and he unshuttered his optics.

"No. I've convinced the others that our best decision does not include your deaths. They agreed with me, after a fashion. We're going to - "

"To what? Send us off to do hard labor?"

Optimus vented wearily, taking a moment to feel the frustration settle in his struts. He knew this wasn't going to be easy, and that it wouldn't get any easier once he fully explained - if Megatron
would let him get a word in edgewise. "We're going to split your mechs up, as much as gestalts and bonds allow, and you're going to live with us, until we feel you've accepted - " Very quickly, he found Megatron before the bars, a snarl on his face.

"You slagging hypocrite."

"I - what?" He asked, rather helplessly.

"Freedom is the right of all sentient beings, my aft it is! Truly, Optimus? I wouldn't have expected your tastes to run towards that of Zeta Prime."

He shook his head, sympathy and something less pleasant swirling in his spark. "We're not going to make your mechs our slaves, Megatron. You will be our responsibility, to take care of until - " he stopped, suppressing a flinch as Megatron smashed his fist into the thick bars, sparks flying on contact. The scent of charred metal filled his nasal receptors.

"We are warriors. We don't need your hospitality, let alone your blatant attempt at justifying the coward's way out - "

"The war is done with, Megatron. None of us will be warriors after this."

The old mech laughed, clearly finding some sort of delight in his words. "You are a fool, Prime. You've fought in a war for countless vorns, a war far older than you - and yet you know nothing of it. Wars are never over, not until the last opposing spark is snuffed out, which you, in all your wisdom and all your noble mercy, refuse to do."

He searched the cracked and dented faceplates of his oldest enemy; the bot he had once held such admiration and respect for, as the simple worker Orion Pax. "You're going to live with me."

He scoffed and sunk back into the dimly lit corner of his cell. "I killed Zeta Prime with my own two hands, Optimus. I can kill you just as easily."

Chapter End Notes

Hello! This is my first attempt at a long fic, and I plan on updating it every two weeks. My tumblr is CopperZealot, so feel free to drop by or send any questions you have there if you don't want to leave one here. To reiterate, this is a slow burn and the rating will be bumped up to Explicit for later chapters. And finally, special thanks to my friend StarlightCaptivator, who beta'd my work and pushed me to post it.
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What'd he say?"

"The usual." Optimus passed by Ironhide and the rest of High Command, trying not to feel disappointed. They had a long, ugly road ahead of them. But for now... "I need to contact Elita One's forces on Cybertron. Hopefully they've made headway with Shockwave and the Rainmakers."

"Scrap. I forgot about them. Are you sure we have enough Autobots ta pull off your little plan?"

"We may have to make due with less than optimal numbers."

Jazz fell into place on his right, undaunted as usual. "We'll make due. Wheeljack was talking about using electrum to reinforce the buildings we'll use so the Cons can't just bust through a wall."

"But the electrum was destroyed during battle."

"True, but Wheeljack's betting Shockwave might have a little, since the Cons all knew what it was. It might be possible to make synthetic electrum from it. He said that there should be enough durabyllium around, as well."

"Promising. Perhaps Elita will know." Perhaps Elita wouldn't rip his helm from his body once she found out his plan. "I'd prefer the Cons out of their cells as soon as possible. Everyone will have to pitch in with Hoist and Grapple."

"Don't worry about it now, Prime. I'm sure Wheeljack and Perceptor will have somethin' figured out."

Ironhide was right. For now, he would have to worry about the femme's reactions first.

"You want to what?"

He was a Prime. He did not shuffle nervously and avoid Elita's glare through the screen. "Death is not the answer to our problems, Elita. We'll all benefit from this. The Matrix has helped me reach this decision."

Elita let out a groan of disgust and tore herself away from the screen. Moonracer poked her face into view, looking - thankfully - far more agreeable than her leader. "Does that mean we can have Shockwave? Please? He's tried to kill us a few times but he's really okay once you're working on the same side."

"Moonracer!

"Oops." She ducked out of frame and Lancer took her place.

"Just a few minor problems over here with structural damage, Prime. Temporary teamwork for the betterment of our, uh, planet. We definitely have not been working in cahoots with Shockwave and his forces."
Behind him, Jazz stifled a laugh.

"Understood, Lancer. There have been times when we joined forces with the Decepticons to prevent our collective destruction. Tell me, how are Shockwaves's mechs?"

"Ummm." She looked over her shoulder, and he heard a few hissed words urging her to 'tell them!'. "Well, they're alive. The seekers sort of panicked when we got Shockwave. He's recharging, and we've removed his gun for safety's sake. Sunstorm wants to know what's happened to the command trine."

That, at least, was a surprise. "He does?"

Moonracer, unable to help herself, pushed her way into the frame. "He's been yelling at us since we put them all in a cell and threatening to rip all sorts of important organs out, so, yes."

"Wait, you put that menace inna cell with the rest of the fliers? I thought he melted bots on contact or somethin'."

Chromia appeared at Ironhide's words and resolutely pushed both her fellow soldiers out of the way. "He's gotten control of it now. The bars were a bit of a problem, since he kept trying to melt them, so we had to move him into a smaller cell with the other trine. Now he can't melt the bars without melting them too. I've been hoping you had a better solution than 'make them our problem', to be honest, the Rainmakers are a pain - "

"Aw, quit yer complainin', once you got a ship fulla angry Cons under your aft - "

Optimus cleared his throat. They both fell silent, looking faintly embarrassed. "Tell Sunstorm the seekers on Earth are all alive and accounted for. They're being held with the rest of the Decepticons in the Ark." Odd, but interesting. The seekers were all technically under the command of Starscream's trine, so he supposed it wasn't that unusual to want to know had happened to their leaders. Potentially, that might mean they were more loyal to Starscream than Megatron. Perhaps if he got Starscream to acquiesce...

He wondered if Starscream would even care if the Cybertronian seekers were alive, and resolutely decided to find out later. "If you don't want to deal with Shockwave and his forces, my mechs will take care of them. But at least tell Shockwave - "

Again, he found Moonracer scrambling to get back into their attention. "No way, we've been fighting them forever! I want to be in charge of Shockwave."

A pink hand touched her shoulder, and then Elita drifted back into sight. "Shockwave is extremely intelligent and loyal. We will be in charge of him, since we've had the most dealings with him."

"And the seekers?"

She hesitated, expression pensive. "We'll see. There aren't many of us, but I'm sure a few can split off to work with your mechs if needed. There are too many Cons to leave anyone on the sidelines. The Rainmakers are incredibly dangerous, not to mention Sunstorm - and the others aren't any slouch either. I hope you've got some ideas on how to handle them safely."

"A few. My scientists are working on more, and once the ground bridge is running, I'd hope yours will offer their own advice."

There was the sound of hands clapping together followed by a 'WOOHOO!' Elita smirked. "I hope that answers your question. If there's nothing else, we'll contact you when the ground bridge is up."
Ironhide turned to face him once the femmes had signed off. "Well, now what? A couple dozen Cons ain't gonna feed themselves."

"Perceptor said the solar converters were working well enough... I imagine the humans will be happy to know we've captured the Decepticons with minimal damage, and perhaps we can finagle some extra supplies to build more converters. That should take care of the issue."

"Now an' then, I think this plan might work."

Amusement flooded his spark, and he bit down on a grin. "Your faith in me is as stout as ever."

"Aw, quit it, I'm allowed a few reservations. Living with Cons of all things..."

"I'll have to contact the government. They'll want to know - "

"Be careful. I like the humans as much as the next Autobot, but sometimes the ones in charge can be a bit tricky."

Worrisome words. The Decepticons had created a lot of chaos for the Earth's inhabitants; retribution would be expected in some measure. He would have to be careful of how he phrased the situation. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Now that you've successfully subdued the Decepticons, what are your next plans?"

Mayor Allen's voice echoed slightly over the speakers of Teletraan-1; a testament to how badly some of the Earth technology meshed with Cybertronian technology.

"We will return to Cybertron with our prisoners to rebuild our planet."

Filmy silence followed his declaration. "...and then?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, aren't you going to... celebrate? Have a press conference? Share the good news? There are plenty of people who would be glad to hear the Decepticons are no longer a danger to them. In fact - "

"I wasn't aware such actions would be necessary. Although we consider Earth a second home, our planet is still - "

The mayor barrelled over his words. "Now hold on one second! I'm just a mayor, but if you tell the President of the United States, or the leader of Russia or any of the other places you've been gallivanting around that you're just going to up and leave, I don't think they're going to take too kindly to it. Not to mention the citizens of Earth have a certain fondness for you."

A very foolish processor thread broke loose, and Optimus found himself thinking of their human allies when he spoke. "We wouldn't leave completely, or immediately. Cybertron is in poor condition, and we have friends here on Earth still. But most of us would have to be on our planet most of the time, due to - construction. Among other issues. But as long as the space bridge is working... I'm sure an arrangement could be worked out. Trade, as it were."

Rather clumsily, he began sorting through several more plans. Trade was a very vague term, but the Autobots had helped where they could to counter the destruction the Decepticons had wrought, so any demands shouldn't be too steep. There was the issue of fuel to consider, and their friends would surely want to know
what was happening, and he doubted the world leaders would deal well with being left in the dark...

Focus. One thing at a time. "Why do you think a press conference is needed?"

"Well... maybe not a press conference, but at least an announcement..."

"If you don't want to do the honors...?"

"Absolutely not! I trust you, Optimus, but your word about the Decepticons should come from your mouth."

Of the many duties as Prime, press had never been his favorite. "I'll take it into consideration. If there's no further questions, it's almost time for my meeting?"

"Oh!" There was the static-buzz of the phone scraping over cloth, as if he'd fumbled. "Of course. Thank you for alerting me first, now I can deal with any nosy reporters. Good luck."

"Ya want backup fer the meeting, then? Or ya wanna handle it on yer own?"

Optimus turned to see Ironhide, Jazz and Prowl. His most valuable officers, but in his mind, every one played a specific, equally important role. "Truthfully, I would like most of you here with me, but I believe it would be best if I spoke with them alone."

"Suit yourself, Prime. But we're just a comm call away, remember?"

"You can even call if it's just to double check some number," Prowl added, looking less pleased to be left out. He'd surely expect a full report on their reactions once Optimus was done.

"I'll keep it in mind. Thank you," he added, and they took the dismissal for what it was.

Now. Just a few hours of explaining why he was removing the deeply violent, destructive aliens from their planet without any tangible form of justice regardless of what some of they might want and he could return to trying to cajole the Decepticons into accepting their terms.

Or more of the Autobots into accepting the Decepticons.

He still wasn't sure which would prove to be more difficult.

"Multiple incoming transmissions from political leaders. Do you wish - "

"Accept them all, Teletraan-1. Better to deal with any objections as soon as possible."

"Transmissions accepted."

"Tell me you have a plan."

The leader of the Decepticons glared at his cell wall.

"I said, Starscream told Onslaught who told Thundercracker who told Wildrider - "

"I heard you the first time."

Vortex went silent. Megatron listened to the muffled shifting and creaking of his mechs moving around, settling and resettling on the uncomfortable slabs sticking out of the walls. The quiet hum of
energon bars was rapidly turning into white noise. "Has Breakdown been awakened yet?"

"The others can't find where they put the stasis field chip. And they can't get the inhibitor claw off either."

"Skywarp?"

"Same. Uh, Lord."

Only Breakdown could create vibrations strong enough to disrupt the energon bars, and Skywarp's ability was useless if he wasn't conscious. None of them were strong enough to break the bars individually, and the gestalts had been split up. "Is it possible for members of different gestalt teams to combine?"

"I... I don't think - "

"I didn't bring you online to think, Vortex, but to act as I order. So act!"

Technically it had been Starscream who'd brought the Combaticons back online, but that was utterly irrelevant. He listened to the shuffling of Vortex crossing his cell and then the loud crack of him kicking his cell mates awake.

"Get up! Get up. Get over here."

Cursing, bitter complaints, and what sounded like someone getting thumped reached his audials. Vortex must have directed Brawl, Drag Strip, Scrapper and Hook somehow, because the dim glow of combination energy - or whatever it was - flowed from the cell next to him, and the warping scrapes and clinks of frames transforming filled the room. There were several grunts and yelps, and what sounded like startled shouting from the other combiners, followed by a shaking crash of metal bodies collapsing to the floor.

"Wonderful," said Starscream, several cells over.

"Shut up unless you have anything useful to add!"

The far blastdoors sprung open, coming to a sudden stop on their hinges with a heavy clank. He refused to press up near the bars to see who it was, but heard several mechs scrambling to get a better look - or get to their pedes.

"Hi!" Came the cheery voice of Bluestreak, and from the multiple pedesteps Megatron could guess he wasn't alone. "So we got everything sorted out, more or less, and we're gonna be the ones who bring you fuel until - you know."

"Nice," said a less familiar voice, one very near to him. Two of the aerialbots darted past his cell, trays full of cubes in hand. They seemed to be trying to out-power walk each other; Bumblebee and Bluestreak followed at a more sedate pace. "Not awkward at all." What was his name - Slingsomething? Slingshot?

The one he certainly knew as Silverbolt spoke. "As long as they know we're not here to poison them." There was a pause, and then, "cause we're not here to poison you! You know. We've got some fuel stocked for emergencies."

"You don't owe them an explanation, Bolt," his brother said, sounding sour.

"Well, we want them to actually eat, right?"
Megatron pulled his attention from the conversation to see Bumblebee sliding a cube into his cell. The energon bars pulled and bent around the scout's hand, making a space just big enough for the sizable cube, and on his wrist sat a thick band with a blinking red light on top. No doubt work of the Autobot scientists. Effective. He supposed that if any of them made a move towards them, the bot would back off and they wouldn't get their fuel.

He sent a dismissive glare the scouts way before snatching his fuel up off the floor. The scrape of pedes, the clinks of cubes, and the low murmurs of his mechs as they refueled fed the embers of his worry; never had so many of them been captured for such a long period. It seemed the Prime had learned from his brief foray into impersonation, and had changed the cell structure rather drastically.

"Don't do that."

Despite his earlier misgivings, Megatron leaned forward enough to see Bluestreak standing back from a cell, tray in hand. The young bot was frowning slightly, but his body remained relaxed and calm.

"Frag yourself," someone grumbled, but they were too quiet and too far away to discern the exact voice. Dead End, perhaps?

"You don't have to make this take forever, it's just fuel, and you're probably hungry by now anyway."

"Excuse us!" Silverbolt, hands filled with empty cubes, darted around Bumblebee to get to the door, his brother fast on his heels. Bizarre, considering how much they aerials seemed to want to talk with his own fliers. Maybe there had been an attack - but no, neither of the other Autobots showed any concern, and the slight lift of hope that Shockwave had figured something out was dashed. Foolish. One had to rely on themselves, after all.

"Are you finished with that?"

Bumblebee, again. Captive or not, no one rushed his fueling time, and he pointedly reclined (as much as one could recline on a flat slab) and took a tiny sip of energon. The leader of the Decepticons allowed himself a small smile at the exasperated sigh.

"I can't believe you got to see the seekers and didn't ask anything!"

"What about Megatron? Was he angry?"

"Did any of them try to break the bars?"

"The cassetticons didn't break out, right?"

Silverbolt sent his brothers a look, frowning at the chatter. They were in such a good mood, too; he hated to ruin it. "We have to go talk to Optimus Prime."

Fireflight perked up at the firm tone. "What? Why? Did something bad happen?"

Slingshot scoffed. "No, but it's gonna."

Skydive stiffened, optics lit with realization. He managed a, "oh no. I completely forgot - " before looking to Silverbolt for confirmation.
Their gestalt leader nodded. "We've got a huge problem."

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to thank you all for your kind comments! They were a very pleasant surprise to see. I'd also like to say sorry in advance for the very slow burn. See you in two weeks!
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

The aerialbots have something important to say and Perceptor meets the femme scientists.

"We got a problem, Prime."

Optimus found Ironhide, Jazz, Prowl and all three scientists were crowding outside his room. He glumly set the cube he'd snatched for himself back down and motioned for them to come in. "What is it?"

Wheeljack spoke. "Well, there's this issue... we sort of don't know how we're gonna transport the Decepticons."

"To... Cybertron? I thought we might just move them with the Ark - "

"No, no, that's fine, if we can get them all loaded and get enough fuel for the Ark. But I'm talking about when we wanna move them so they'll be living with us."

"What he means is, should they be unconscious? Conscious, but with stasis cuffs on high? If so, they'll have to be carried. If they're awake and not under the influence of the cuffs, they'll probably fight - in which case we'll have to drag them around, something I doubt will lead to any positive associations..." Perceptor trailed off, looking pensive.

Skyfire sighed heavily, and his vents sent a wave of warm air outwards. "I don't think the stasis cuffs will be a good idea. Being aware of what's going on, but unable to act... that's a level of defenselessness the Decepticons aren't used to. Especially with their enemies."

"I don't mean ta bring more bad news inta it, but the only way we're gonna get any stasis cuffs on 'em is by going into the cells and pinnin' 'em all down. They're prob'ly not gonna like that aspect much either."

"What if," Prowl began, "you devise a serum that would render them unconscious. If we put it in their fuel - "

"Mixmaster would notice," Jazz pointed out.

"Then he'll be fueled last. Once they're all unconscious - it'll have to be diluted enough so it won't harm the cassettes - they can all be moved to their new quarters and they'll wake up without having to bear the transportation. They'll be angry, certainly, but much of the..."

"Trauma?" Skyfire offered.

"...yes. Much of it will be avoided. And reuniting with their gestalt or trine mates certainly won't hurt, either."

Optimus grinned wryly. "Well, I don't know that you needed my input at all."
His science team all looked slightly abashed, as well as Ironhide, but Jazz and Prowl seemed pleased. "You would have had to be informed regardless, and it's better to have you involved during discussions."

"Well, that's - "

There was a knock upon the door. A rather insistent one, he noticed. "Come in."

There was a muttered, "Is there going to be enough room?" which he ignored until he realized it was the aerialbots. They piled in relentlessly, squeezing around the older bots to get to Optimus.

"Hi," Silverbolt greeted, in that timid tone he sometimes used around High Command. "We have a question. Just to clarify something."

"Is it to ask to look after the seekers again? Because - "

"That's not it!" Slingshot cried, annoyed.

"It is about the seekers, though." Air Raid added.

"What is it?"

"What're you gonna do when the seekers need to go flying?"

Ironhide laughed. "What're ya talkin' about? We can't let the seekers go flying. They'd run off."

Silverbolt determinedly did not break optic contact with the Prime. "Yes you can. Because they're gonna need to go flying some time, probably multiple times a week, and you can't keep them from flying."

Optimus cut off the sound of Prowl gearing up for a lecture on respecting one's commanders. "Silverbolt, I realize the seekers are not going to be happy about being stuck inside, but they pose a security risk, and we can't just let them - "

"You have to! Remember when Fireflight was grounded?"

He did remember. The aerial had ignored orders during a battle and had nearly been injured. He'd been grounded for a month, relegated to indoor shifts, and by the end of the second week had started two fights with the twins. It had devolved rather quickly into throwing things - chairs and cubes, mostly - and ended with him locking himself in their room and refusing to come out. He'd assumed the punishment had been too harsh on a newbuild, even one who fought in wars. Despite arguments from Prowl and Ironhide, he'd rescinded the other weeks of punishment and instead had Fireflight clean up and apologize to the twins before promising to never ignore orders again.

He wasn't sure what that had to do with the matter at hand. "I don't understand the relevance."

Silverbolt looked as if he had found a remarkably stupid creature that insisted running face-first into the wall over and over again in his quarters.

"You can't keep an aerial from flying or it crashes their system."

The rest of the room turned to stare at the shuttleformer, including the aerials.

Skyfire looked strangely disappointed, which was a reaction he was not used to receiving. "I wish I hadn't been away that week, or I would have stopped you. Grounding for more than an orbital cycle typically results in an inability to function for an adult aerial, because..." he hesitated, clearly
uncomfortable. "I can't explain it. You're a grounder, and you don't suffer from the same problems if you're not allowed to go racing. But flying burns out all the extra energy aerials have, and it's important for bonding with trine mates or gestalts, and it's when their processor can... move all the irrelevant information and sort through it and find solutions they otherwise couldn't because it accesses a specific part of the brain module... suffice it to say, when aerials can't fly, they can't function. It's like starving." Then Skyfire - quiet, peaceful Skyfire - glared at them all. "You're not supposed to ground aerial sparklings. Ever."

"We're not sparklings!" Slingshot insisted.

"You are, Slingshot. You're still very young."

"But we're newbuilds. We have adult frames. Doesn't that mean our brain modules are also those of an adult?" Skydive asked.

Skyfire watched them with sympathy in his optics. "No. Your programming and coding is that of sparklings. Being a newbuild only means that your body is stronger and your language coding is already online, not that you're an adult. The brain module does not change between frame upgrades, and it only accumulates more knowledge over time. You're not even a quarter of a vorn old yet."

They were two years old. Optimus felt as if something distinctly unpleasant was crawling in his tanks, and identified it as guilt. "I wasn't aware it would be an issue. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed."

"You're not the only one at fault. I shouldn't have assumed you would know."

He still felt as if he were, oddly enough, in trouble. It had been a long time since he'd felt so clumsy and awkward among his own mechs. Fortunately, Jazz came to his rescue.

"So if the seekers are gonna need some exercise, what're we gonna do about it? Tracking devices? Build a giant dome for them to fly in? Actually, that might not be too bad..."

"Won't work." Perceptor muttered. "We won't be able to build a dome big enough for them to fly in. And that's including the other trines, too."

One of the aerials exclaimed "Rainmakers!" and promptly got shushed by his brothers.

Skyfire was still watching the aerialbots. "Astrotrain will need to fly as well. Perhaps if the Aerialbots and myself were present, each individual trine could go flying outside. If any of them made a break for it, they could be stopped. And that way the Aerialbots could get their flying in as well... three or four times a week would be best."

"Each? How?"

"Even just two joors of flying a day would be enough. It could be spread out over a week, so entire days weren't spent on just flying for the aerials and myself."

"That sounds unsafe," Prowl insisted. "The seekers are far faster than any other fliers. And what if they go in three directions?"

"We could set up a perimeter?" Wheeljack offered.

"How? They can go up. What's a bunch of grounders standing around gonna do?"

"Not a perimeter of mechs! Like an electrical fence. But without the electrocution," he hastened to
add at the outraged stares from the aerials. "It could be set up so the Cons can't cross it - we could fit 'em with little devices that'll knock 'em into stasis if they cross the line, it can be lit up or send them an alert if they get too close, and when they drop the aerials could catch 'em. Right? Does that not sound good?"

Optimus noticed that Skyfire seemed to be struggling with the idea. "I suppose... if it didn't hurt them, and they were told about it before hand. I can't think of any way it could be improved."

After a moment of consideration, Optimus addressed Silverbolt. "What do you five think?"

Silverbolt seemed to think their opinion being asked was unusual and alarming, but Air Raid and Slingshot both approved. Loudly.

"We get to go flying with the trines!"

"Do you think they'd teach us some moves?"

"Do you think the Rainmakers will wanna fly with us?"

"I think it'll work," Skydive offered, to the enthused nodding of Fireflight.

Silverbolt waved to encompass his brothers. "If they're in, I'm in."

The mood in the room had lifted dramatically, he noticed, and allowed himself a smile. "In that case, we had better start constructing the apartments now. We also need to see if there is as much durabyllium as we need, and -"

"On it, Prime." Ironhide took his chance to be free of the overcrowded room, and was quickly followed by Skyfire. "I'll go round up the volunteers."

"I need to speak to Perceptor about the electrum in Shockwave's lab. I imagine he might prefer to go."

"There are scientists among Elita's warriors who will want to help."

For a rare moment, Optimus would have swore he saw Skyfire smirk - but then it was gone, replaced with a more neutral expression. "I will tell him so."

"Of course I would want to go to Shockwave's lab!"

Wheeljack and Skyfire watched their fellow scientist scurry around the lab, snatching tools and containers off shelves to shove into his subspace.

"No offense meant, of course, you're a brilliant scientist but my fields of metallurgy and electrical engineering would be most suited to this task - and with you being a flier it would be best if you stayed with Wheeljack and worked on the serum - fuel intake for aerials and energy output, you know -"

"Of course." He hid a smile behind a hand, trying not to laugh at the sheer amusement coming off of Wheeljack's field. "I'm sure you'll be happy to hear the femme scientists will be working alongside you as well."

Perceptor came to a dead stop, arms full of spare cubes. "It... you mean Elita's soldiers? But I thought they were all - " he mimed shooting a blaster and Wheeljack chuckled.
"Ironhide mentioned at least two of them used to be scientists. Dunno what for, mind, he didn't say."

The microscope's expression grew pensive, and he slowly tucked away the last of the cubes. "I forgot about that. Perhaps they will know the layout better... " he seemed to recover and perked up a bit. "Maybe they know if he has any secret caches of material or hidden experiments we can use. It's not out of the question, is it, if they spent their vorns working right under his optic."

"Tell them we say hi," Wheeljack asked, helpfully straightening out the slight mess Perceptor would no doubt leave behind.

"Of course. Although now that I think about it, I wonder if it will be booby-trapped in some way..."

"Maybe they can wake him up and ask - "

"I doubt that, having him unconscious is the safest bet. The seekers might have a better idea."

Wheeljack hopped into his chair and propped his pedes up, clearly uninterested in any more cleaning. "Fantastic idea, Skyfire. They're gonna love talking to us."

"No need to worry about that, I bet a promise to get a message to or from the elite trine will loosen any lips if we need their help." Perceptor straightened up, his subspace stuffed full. "Alright, I'm off. Don't get into any trouble while I'm away."

"Who's coming again?"

Lancer sighed. "Ironhide, Gears, Bluestreak, Mirage and Perceptor."

Moonracer bounced from toe to heel, optics locked on the doors to the space bridge. "When are they coming again?"

"Calm yourself, Moonracer." Elita set the tips of her fingers against the bright teal shoulder, and the femme went still. "They'll be here when they've finished with preparations. It's a lot of work to do, and I have no doubt Optimus will have only sent his best mechs."

"He thinks all of his mechs are his best."

Their leader eyed Greenlight for a moment, and all at once they noticed her lipplates were pressed firmly together to hide a smile. "That may be true, but I have faith in his decisions."

The instant Elita released her, Moonracer quick-stepped over to Chromia. "Are you excited to see Ironhide again?"

Their typically quiet gunner frowned, one optic ridge popping up in suspicion. "Why do you ask?"

Firestar snorted. "Cause you got the hots for him, lady." They all snickered at the sour look the comment brought, until Elita shushed them and pointed toward the door.

As the door swooshed open, Moonracer whispered "I'm sure he likes you too" and got a swat on the arm for her trouble making. The sharpshooter gasped in delight and barreled past the others to fling her arms around a smaller gray mech. "Bluuuuuuuestreak! My gun buddy!" The two playfully quarreled and laughed, while Elita and Ironhide and their people ignored the younger shenanigans.

"It's good to see you again," Chromia offered to the old red mech, prompting a few laughs from Firestar and Greenlight.
"It's good to be back on Cybertron again, 'specially considerin' how well things are."

A bit nervously, Perceptor approached Elita. "Hello. I'm one of the scientists, and we were hoping one or a few of you might be able to show me around Shockwave's lab? We were thinking of structural designs for the Decepticons and Autobots who will be rooming together, but since we currently lack much of the stronger material, we were hoping - "

"Slow down there, techie," Firestar interrupted.

"'Techie'?" He yelped, to the flashier femme's amusement. He was even more surprised when the green femme sidled up to him and slung an arm around his shoulder.

"Don't worry Perceptor, we have you covered - you are Perceptor, aren't you?"

"Yes, and I would hardly call myself a - "

"Lancer!" As Greenlight began herding him away, she snagged the arm of another femme. "Come with us, you know the chemical stuff he did better than me."

"Alright, don't pull - and slow down! You'll make the poor guy take a spill."

Perceptor could just feel his faceplates beginning to heat, to his irritation. No sense of appropriate professional distance! No sense of personal space! No wonder he'd never seen either of them around the academy. Down and around the two Autobots lead him, into the belly of Shockwave's headquarters - which were not so much the horror show he'd expected, but a fairly unadorned building that only truly interested him once they approached the lab.

The lab was thrice as large as the space Wheeljack, Mainframe and Perceptor had declared their working area; heavy-looking metal counters ringed the three walls opposite the door, with the middle counter slightly larger and paired with a single rolling chair. Neat stacks of equipment, chemicals, and spare parts were organized in each section. From just a glance, it appeared they were dedicated to different pursuits, one of which looked to be biochemical procedures, another to altering frames and flight modifications, and the final to weapons.

_Wheeljack would love this._

"Here we are!" Greenlight offered a theatrical little bow, one arm swept sideways to point toward the room. "Don't touch the weapons area, we haven't figured out how to turn off the defense system for that one yet. Also don't touch the chemicals because we haven't made sure they're not individually booby-trapped either. The body mods are okay."

But another thing had torn his attention away entirely; the center of the room. Smack in the middle of it all was a slab, complete with restraints and big enough for even the likes of Skyfire. There was a tiny raised tray sitting beside it, and it was thankfully empty.

The slab, however, was _not_.

"Is that - "

"Shockwave himself, yes. We figured leaving him in stasis until we had a more permanent location would be best."

"Better than leaving him in an old building alone, at least," Greenlight added. "Just don't knock him off the slab and it'll be fine."
"That reminds me, what exactly did you do with the seekers again?"

"Holding cells. Shockwave had a bunch of them down in the lower levels, and we had to do a little remodeling for Sunstorm but it works." Lancer shrugged and guided him over to the central workstation. "He had them in stasis to preserve resources until he realized we were alive. There's the Rainmakers; Ion, Nova, and Acid, and then there's Hotlink, Bitstream, and Nacelle. They're not quite as competent, and as far as we ever saw, don't seem to have any powers. Of course the last of them is Sunstorm -" 

"That's odd," Perceptor said, mentally scrambling to match names with faces from millions of years old recordings. "I thought Sunstorm was with the Rainmakers."

"No trine, but we saw him fighting with the second trine most often. I think the Rainmakers usually stuck near Shockwave."

He wondered exactly how they'd reacted once they realized their leader had been taken. Panic? Rage? He had enough trouble imagining what they'd do if Optimus had ever been kidnapped or defeated at the hands of Megatron, let alone seekers whose motives he could barely understand. It must have been a three-fold reaction, as they had suffered the loss of Shockwave, Starscream, and Megatron.

Perhaps "loss" was not quite accurate, but still, he didn't envy what their brain modules had gone through during those tumultuous hours.

"Right," Perceptor said, forcing his mind back on track. "Okay. Who here has gone through any of Shockwave's supplies? Can you imagine where he might, if he had any, store electrum? Or possibly the substances needed to create it? I assume Shockwave would at least try -"

"No idea," Greenlight cut in, rather carelessly. "I bet it'd be in the body mods pile if its in here, I know the whole lot of you got into it down on Earth, so -"

"What? No."

"No idea," Greenlight cut in, rather carelessly. "I bet it'd be in the body mods pile if its in here, I know the whole lot of you got into it down on Earth, so -"

"What? No." Lancer cracked her knuckles, seemingly for no reason other than because she liked the sound. "It's a chemical process, and a damn complex one if I remember my readings correctly, it'd be in the chemicals area. He wouldn't start by putting it on the frame parts until -"

"Do either of you," Perceptor began, struggling for control, "know how to make it?"

The two femmes exchanged glances. Neither seemed bothered by the frantic-sharp tone of their fellow scientist. "No," Greenlight admitted. "But I bet we can find out."

"To the computer console," Lancer ordered, and next three joors were spent on a crash-course on hacking Shockwave's extremely temperamental and well-guarded computer.

"So, should we pick a direction and start walking, or does someone have an idea of what they're doing around here?"

Elita scowled at Gears, who remained staunchly unrepentant. "It would help if we knew what exactly you were looking for."

"We need as much durabyllium steel as we can possibly find. I don't know about how they'll want the buildings constructed, but it's gonna have to be enough for two armies to fit in and can't have any weak points at all." Bluestreak wished that Hoist or Grapple had finished drawing up the plans for them, but knew they were busy with more urgent projects. They certainly had their hands full, and he
had once overheard them say that they wished the Constructicons could help. A bad idea, to be sure, but he understood why they wanted the extra help their experience could offer. The construction-minded minibots were less specialized.

"But where are we going to get that much of it? Even if we tore down all the old government buildings and made them into huge complexes - which I do not think is a good idea, anyway - there'd never be enough."

"I know where we can go."

They turned to stare at their as-of-yet silent friend, Mirage. The former towers mech was focused on the map rather than them, and pointed to a taller apartment-style building closer to the heart of the city.

"I had a few friends who made their homes out of durabyllium. Paranoia, you know. Others did as well, although many covered it up with paint, but I remember those locations too. Newer sections of the towers, or certain rooms, were also made from it. The schematics were usually kept in the lowest level for storage."

Ironhide stared at him, shocked by their good fortune. Then his expression shifted into something sharper. "Optimus said you requested to be a part of this mission."

"I did. I wasn't sure about the damage, since it could be difficult getting around Iacon and transportation would be an issue, but since you say the bombings were less frequent in that area, it should be worth looking into."

Elita frowned. "I was under the impression you used to live in that area as a tower mech. Why didn't you know the condition it was in?"

"I left and joined the Autobots before the bombs fell." This was technically true and left much of the context out, such as the screaming fight he'd had with his guardians and angry friends, but he could hardly imagine it being any business of theirs.

Gears wheeled around to stare at the mech Cliffjumper had so despised, a feeling that had been followed with glowing words of praise when the two of them had miraculously become friends. Then he slapped his hand onto the thick blue arm. "You're alright, Mirage."

The blue mech regarded him rather blankly, and then, to his surprise, Gears felt the frame beneath his palm heat slightly in embarrassment, and he mumbled, "no praise necessary."

"I believe it is," Elita replied. "Mark it down. I want to know exactly where we're going today."
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

Blaster embarrasses Optimus. Meanwhile, Megatron is outraged and First Aid doesn't care.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"No, no, we have to extend that wire there, the blue one can be reconnect into the side and it'll work fine."

"That's not blue, that's purple. Or do you mean the one down below?"

"I mean the one below the mass sensors."

"Use the proper colors, then, that's purple if I ever saw it - "

"Purple's the Con badge, that's nothing like it - "

"What's wrong with your optics?"

"What's wrong with your brain module??"

Optimus bit his lipplates, watching Wheeljack and Grapple as they bickered and failed to notice their leader standing only a few strides behind them. Hoist, sitting on the bridge next to an open panel, waved cheerfully. "We're making great time, in case it isn't obvious," he said, alerting his two friends to the fact that they had company.

"Optimus," Wheeljack greeted, recovering quickly. "What can we do ya for?"

He'd heard Raoul say that once, and he took a moment to parse the phrase. Simple rearrangement, but it never failed to amuse him when he found his people adopting human slang. "I've come to check that you have enough of what you need, and to speak to Hoist." He cast his gaze over the pile of empty casings, circuit boards and extra wire. "Do you need more?"

"As aesthetically boring as this job is, we've got more than enough to expand the bridge and cover for any explosions that might result from misidentification." Grapple sent a pointed look at Wheeljack, and Optimus pretended not to see the rude gesture the inventor made.

"Good. Hoist, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind sharing maintenance of the Decepticons with Ratchet once the bridge was complete?"

Hoist blew air out of vents and spun around on his aft to fully face his leader. "Mind it? I'd welcome it! I told him we could share shifts with the Autobots before but he's so touchy and wired. Mech needs to get more sleep. Umm. I wouldn't be going alone, right?"

"I figured Skyfire would be willing to accompany you, but if needed - "
Hoist waved the rest of his sentence away, already turning back to whatever his previous work had been. "Nah, he's good, if he can give Megatron a wallop when he's mad, he can deal with rowdy Cons."

Optimus surveyed the work so far completed; huge sections of the space bridge had been disconnected and were in the process of wires being extended or replaced, sensors were being added along the new casings meant to hold the spaced out sections of circuitry, and some parts were simply being tuned up. Soon enough, the bridge would be able to transfer all the Cybertronians, and at least triple the amount of mass it could move. He nodded, double checked the status of his soldiers (low on recharge, high in spirits) and left.

Back in his office, he sent a request for their resident boom box; Blaster appeared not two kliks later and instantly derailed the conversation with, "now that we've got all the Cons in cells, are patrols really necessary anymore?"

"Well, I don't think taking risks just because we're doing well is a good move."

"Winning the war is 'doing well', is it? Well, everyone's running themselves ragged - including you - but I can't argue about caution."

Optimus looked over his shoulder at the closed doors. "You could, if you felt it was necessary."

Blaster paused for a split second, and then smiled. "I'm just giving you a hard time, Optimus. Don't worry about it. Now," he dropped into the waiting chair, "what did you need me for?"

"I confess I don't know as much as I probably should about different frame types and relationships. Bluestreak has mentioned that Soundwave refuses to let his casseticons out to refuel, and since they're under orders to monitor all fueling and collect the cubes afterwards, they can't exactly leave one behind. How would you say we should address this problem? Are they in stasis inside Soundwave, and need less fuel than usual?"

"Is Soundwave fueling?"

"He has two and a half cubes, every time."

"Then it's fine." At the confused look, Blaster continued. "Casseticons are not in stasis so much as a light form of recharge, but when they're docked, they're connected to the host, who can transfer energon to them. Their altmodes have connectors that hook up to fuel lines that can be accessed on command - want to see?"

"Um, no," Optimus insisted, embarrassed. Blaster grinned and he added, "that won't be necessary." This did not result in the grin getting any smaller, and the Autobot leader finally allowed a self-deprecating smile. "Thank you for your assistance, Blaster. You are dismissed."

That got him a wink and some peace and quiet where he could wait out the heat from his embarrassment. He knew it was rather ridiculous to think that any mech, unless they were a very dedicated doctor of some sort, would know the in and outs of every different frametype... but he couldn't shake the feeling that something as basic as energon consumption shouldn't have escaped his notice, even if it was technically not the responsibility of a leader.

They're all under my care now. I have to know this.

First his mistakes with the aerialbots, now his lack of knowledge about hosts frames and their symbiots. They'd have to make sure the Decepticons were truly suited to their Autobot caretakers, if not in similar frametype, then in temperament.
Don't call them that, everyone will hate it.

He'd have to ask Megatron if any of his Decepticons had specific intake requirements. But the possibility of Megatron lying to him or evading the question was high. Perhaps Shockwave would be a better source of information? But then again, he might find the most logical decision would be to lie or withhold information. The Autobots would have to ask individually and hope for the best.

Bad plan. Not a plan at all. We'll have to rely on Skyfire and Powerglide for the aerials.

A double-click from the speaker next to his desk alerted him to an incoming call. Realizing it must have come from Cybertron, as everyone on The Ark could simply access the base frequency, he quickly accepted it.

"Guess who!"

"Moonracer." No one else would call the leader of the Autobots in such a casual and energetic manner. "I take it things are going well?"

"A-ffirmative! Elita wanted me to tell you that Mirage has lead us to twenty two buildings containing durabyllium."

"That many? So quickly?"

"We lucked out - at first he only knew of twelve - but Gears was searching through an older factory that used to supply it and found a list of buyers. Mirage knew who they were too, so we just had to confirm they really were made of durabyllium. Surprise, they were."

"That's excellent news. And... how is everyone else?"

Across the line, Moonracer snorted. "Perceptor and Lancer and Greenlight are all messed up because they went and tripped Shockwave's turrets twenty billion times. He, uh, needs a new leg. And Bluestreak fell down a hole but he's fine. His gun, hm. He needs a new rifle now. Elita's happy with the progress we made. And Ironhide and Chromia have been flirting nonstop and now Perceptor is making slashing motions so I probably shouldn't have said that but I did so too bad."

Optimus smiled. "Thank you, Moonracer."

"Anytime, Optimus Prime. Oh, we're working on mapping out where we can move the sections of the buildings right now, some of the roads are too wrecked to do anything with, but I'm sure we'll figure it out."

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to call. I know many of my mechs are enjoying the time to pursue things other than weapons and training, but none of them will mind assisting your team."

"I'll pass your message along to Elita."

"Prime said if we need help he'll bully his mechs into coming over here."

"He did not."

Elita briefly adopted a pose Perceptor had seen used by various teachers when dealing with unpredictable students; hands on hips, shoulders back, mouth a severe line. Behind that severity, however, he would swear lurked amusement.
Moonracer didn't so much as shutter an optic at her leader. "He didn't say it in so many words, but
that's definitely what he meant."

Elita frowned. "The Autobots on Earth are loyal soldiers, but I would not say they are always good
soldiers. No offense meant," she added, "but I have heard that there are times when they go against
orders or become involved in 'shady' side-projects. If some of them decided not to assist with the
Decepticons - "

"I wouldn't say there's any need to worry. We were all present the day Optimus proposed that we
live with the Decepticons rather than... well, the alternatives. I wouldn't say everyone was pleased
about it, but if they agreed, they won't back out now."

"I can confirm that. No one can say no to Optimus anyway," Grapple said, with a nod at Mirage.
"But enough about that. How exactly are we supposed to move all this durabyllium?"

"Omega Supreme could help." Perceptor offered. "He used to work in construction, and he's
certainly big enough to move them."

"But entire buildings?"

"We don't have to move the entire building. How do you think they were constructed in the first
place?"

Elita shot Mirage a scrutinizing, if confused, look. "How do you - ?"

"I may have met a few mechs who were lucky enough to know about the process. It's really quite
simple, but of course rather dangerous, as it can't be broken down into smaller pieces easily.
However, walls, ceilings and floors can be dismantled with the proper tools and procedures. Workers
simply have to be careful not to be crushed under the larger sections."

"Care to share with the rest of the class?"

"Application of enough heat to where the two sections meet followed by immediately coating the
area with something very cold. It becomes brittle for a short period and can be broken apart with
enough force. When you want to attach the two you simply weld them together. I have to admit I
don't know what they actually used for the cold substance, but I've found that Earth has many of our
rarer elements. Perhaps we could find something there?" He looked towards Perceptor at this point,
and the Autobot sat up from his slump against a fallen wall.

"Liquid nitrogen can cause cold burns on contact with the organic species, and it's not difficult to get
a hold of on Earth. Come to think of it, it can create an enormous amount of energy when it
explodes, too. That might be useful for creating more Energon in large amounts."

"It can explode?" Elita demanded, cross. Beside her, Lancer looked intrigued.

"The chemical compounds break down to create nitrogen in its gaseous state. They can be vaporized,
burned, or decompose on their own."

"Are we creating doors and stuff out of the durabyllium too?" Moonracer asked. "You said it can't be
broken down into small pieces, right? And it would be ridiculous if we went to all this trouble to find
and make everything and then used an iron lock that could be broken with a good kick."

Grapple scoffed. "Durabyllium isn't the only near-indestructible substance on this planet, you know.
We used trithyllium to make good locks and hinges and the like, when needed. We could make the
doors and then use electrum to reinforce it."
"And you're sure we can find all these? I don't want to go making plans that can't be carried out."

"Wouldn't a' said it if I didn't know where we could find it."

Elita nodded. She looked more relaxed, even as she scanned the horizon for any movement or changes. "Fine. What about the routes that were suggested? There are no obstacles or weak areas that would crumble under our pedes, or even mechs like Omega Supreme, outside of the corrections you handed in?"

They all shook their heads in the negative. She scanned the area again, as if she expected bad news at any moment, but the atmosphere remained cool and still around them. "Alright. Let's head back."

The good news from Elita and the others made the rounds quickly; his mechs back-slapped Mirage, Grapple, Bluestreak and Perceptor, even when the scientist still had a slight limp. He suspected they would have offered similar thanks to Elita and her bots had they chosen to stay, but they were too worried about leaving Shockwave and the seekers alone with so few to guard them. The news had his crew relaxing, some of their tension draining when they realized the resources were mostly accounted for, and Optimus had followed suit by lounging in his office while he studied the newly compiled lists of Autobots and Decepticons.

Prime?

There was their other medic, Hoist. I'm here.

There's a problem down in the holding cells - I'm not sure if it's a trick or not... I already called Ratchet and Skyfire's not having much luck with it.

A chill went down his spinal strut, as if someone had dumped a bucket of nitrogen down his back, and he jolted from the chair in a panic. What's happened? A breakout? Has someone been injured?

The seekers aren't doing too well, I tried to give them a small dose of cryo-gas to calm them down but they kept turning their turbines on.

By the time he'd reached the cells, Optimus had realized the seekers were going through the process of flight withdrawal. After the discussion with the aerialbots, he'd looked it up and now knew it was known by other names - sky hunger, flight sickness, ground sickness - but he couldn't help but compare it to the ordeal that Syk addicts and circuit booster users went through when trying to get clean. But flight was not a drug, but a necessity to aerials, and no amount of starvation would suddenly cure them of it.

The seekers were not doing well, with the exception of the unconscious Skywarp; Starscream was sitting on the floor with his back to the room, hands on his audials, and heaving quietly as if he were trying to force a purge. His cell mates had shoved themselves against the opposite wall, looking deeply uncomfortable. Thundercracker was being restrained by his cell mates, and he could see several strips of paint had been scratched off his wings. The Coneheads were not much better, and he noticed Thrust passed out on the floor with a large dent in his helm. Motormaster stood beside his prone form, resentfully rubbing his scraped knuckles.

"I wasn't sure what to do, I thought maybe Perceptor could put the bit of nucleon we have through heat reduction to remove the micromagnetals -"

"That," Ratchet interrupted in a dangerous voice, "would make an intoxicant."
"Remove the what?" Optimus asked.

"It drastically reduces the possibility of power or energy enhancing abilities and instead leads to the brain module slowing down its own processes."

"It's the opposite of Syk, essentially," Ratchet offered. "It's also just as addictive and can have it's own slew of nasty side effects."

"Not to the same degree!" Hoist insisted, looking more uneasy than Optimus had ever seen him. He couldn't find it in himself to blame the medic, not while Skyfire was crouched by Starscream's cell, hopelessly trying to get the seeker to look at him.

"We don't have enough of it anyway," Ratchet said, not unkindly. "There are two trines here as well as the ones on Cybertron, and if they're in better shape I don't imagine it'll be for long."

"What about induced stasis?"

The Autobots wheeled around to see First Aid, flanked by Streetwise. "How would you propose we do that?" Optimus asked, cutting off whatever Hoist was about to say. The sounds of the Decepticons straining to keep the seekers from hurting themselves was doing little for his patience.

"Stasis net. It's a bit tricky to get it to work since it requires the connections to be continuously held despite going through extremely delicate wiring, but it works a lot quicker than a bolt, and if the Decepticons would hold the seekers still - "

"And I don't suppose you'd think to ask me about what you'll be doing to my seekers?"

The Prime banished all expression from his faceplates and forced himself to meet Megatron's gaze. "If they are left alone, they will do harm to themselves and possibly others. Even with their weapons and thrusters disabled - "

"And whose fault is that, Optimus Prime?" The older mech was undeniably smug, but there was a bitter set to his mouth that belied the gravity of the situation. "Any bot with half his brain module intact would know keeping seekers - any aerial - grounded would lead to instability. No doubt you're quite upset at this terribly convenient mistake."

A flash of mortification and that undefinable sick feeling deep in his spark left his frame feeling colder. "We did not do this on purpose." Again he thought of his mishap with the aerialbots and how it hadn't even occurred to him to check if flight frames had different needs than grounders. "I'm - "

Whatever he was going to say was drowned out by First Aid. "We don't need your permission to do anything to them, Megatron. They are not your seekers."

"Check your military codes, Autobot. As their leader it falls to me whether or not they receive treatment if they are currently incapable of making their own decisions, and if their remaining trine is unavailable, which it is - "

"Medical professionals don't require the permission of the highest ranking commanding officer present if the Chief Medic, or the highest ranking medic available, declares it an urgent medical emergency." First Aid spoke as calmly as if he were giving a presentation in class, and not to the face of a deeply furious enemy. Megatron appeared to be contemplating forcing his way though the energon bars and tearing the young medic apart, but to Optimus' mounting surprise, he was paid little attention. "This appears to be a medical emergency to me. Ratchet, do you agree?"

"Course I do, but we didn't have any stasis nets aboard the Ark when we crash landed on Earth, and
I'm not sure how quick we could find any on Cybertron."

The Protectobot shrugged, apparently unbothered. "Streetwise can make them."

"Yes I can. No I won't tell you how I came about this information."

"If you would start as soon as possible?" Behind him, Megatron made a sound of disgust, but Optimus would not let the chance to take back a modicum of control of the situation slip by. "If the process is simple enough to teach, others might be able to help as well. We can't afford to let the seekers stay like this for long."

Streetwise jerked one shoulder up in an approximation of a shrug, discomfited by the attention. He was used to the rough and tumble roads and lively back-alleys of his home, or rolling with his brothers, and not the undivided attention of their leader. "I can grab a few bots, I know who could figure it out pretty easy."

"We'll move fast," First Aid said, directing his sympathetic words at the mechs who were still restraining the seekers one way or another. Sitting on top of them seemed to be the most popular option.

"I'll stay here, in case something... in case I'm needed." Hoist nodded a bit to himself. "If someone else would - ?"

"I'll stay." Skyfire had not moved an inch from his position by Starscream's holding cell, and didn't look prepared to do so any time soon.

Streetwise worked as quickly as he could, gathering mecha whose work wasn't immediately needed. Not four hours later they had a batch of nets ready to be deployed, and Perceptor had found and cleaned up a net deployer for them. Only one, of course, and it was a bit on the frail side, but it was certainly better than nothing. It was a good thing, too, as the mechs trying to keep the fliers from harming anyone were fast running out of energy and gladly plastered themselves to the cell walls when they were given the order.

The fliers were far enough gone that they didn't even register what was happening to their cohorts. Even released, they were in bad enough shape they only stumbled or shuffled around on the floor in confusion for the half-klik of freedom before the deployed net engulfed their frames. Each intersection of netting connected a massive current, and one by one, each mech fell into stasis without even a token protest.

Except, of course, one notably stubborn air commander. His half-choked gasp barely counted, however much it affected Skyfire, who had a careful but firm grasp of his arms. If the Prime had been there, he would have offered a comforting hand on the big mech's shoulder, but he was busy speaking with Elita while Perceptor and the femme scientists brainstormed together over shared workloads. Skyfire stared forlornly at the crumpled form in his hands before he gently hoisted the seeker into his arms. Even the other Decepticons were quiet as the shuttleformer carried his old friend out of the cell, although this was less from tact and more from the memory of him hefting Megatron above his head.

Streetwise stuffed the last net into the deployer and took careful aim at the last mech - a struggling Dirge - and pulled the trigger without pause. The Decepticons seemed to be low on energy after fighting to keep their comrades from hurting themselves, and several were slumped exhaustedly against the walls. He didn't mind in the least - the more quiet the Con, the less mess they made - and
returned the nod from Skyfire once he had taken the seeker from the cell.

First Aid checked each mech over, making little interested and vaguely positive-sounding noises, and then ordered each and every one off to managed stasis. The affair seemed strangely somber, even if it was for the good of the fliers, and the Autobots put the silence down to the Decepticons feeling angry or bitter about a few of their strongest being moved out of their sight. If they had looked a little closer, they might have realized how strange it was, but none of them knew their enemies well enough to know better.

Optimus arrived early the next morning.

He arrived earlier than he'd planned, because Hoist had called him in in a mild panic.

He addresses his greatest concern first. "Have the stasis nets worn off?"

"The nets worked fine! It's the fragging cryo-gas we forgot about."

He cycled his optics in surprise, still stuck at the entrance to the room. Hoist had every right to be worried; although he shared the responsibility of the Decepticons with Ratchet and First Aid, he had been the one to come in for the morning shift and realize that something had gone wrong. Mostly because they had failed to properly vent the room completely, and the Decepticons had been exposed to the cryo-gas long enough they were rather... out of it.

Not stasis-locked, no. They'd gone to recharge and awoken as usual, but now languished about in a stupor, quiet and unequipped to do much more than huddle together in a pile. Optimus wandered past the cells, carefully studying each mech or mechs as he did, while Hoist ranted in the background. The strain in his voice didn't seem to cause their wards any concern, and the most any did was slowly shutter their optics at them.

"Are they... conscious?"

"Well. Yes and no. They weren't exposed enough to actually knock them in to stasis, but it seems to have shut down most of the higher functions of their brain modules."

Optimus stopped to watch Dead End cuddle at Mixmaster's arm, and the chemist did nothing beyond flex his hand a bit. "Do they understand what's going on around them? Will they remember what's happened? Are the casseticons safe like this?" He could not imagine any of the Decepticons coming back to themselves and being at all pleased with what had happened.

"It's instinct for a host to feed their casseticons, so yes, they should be fine. As I said, their higher functions aren't exactly functioning, so their usual personal issues and grudges are not at the forefront of their minds. Nothing is, really. I wouldn't even say they're really awake, but they can see and probably interpret what's going on around them, like someone touching them or walking by them, but..." Hoist shrugged. "From how out of it they look, I think they'll save any information processing for later."

Optimus filed all the information away for later musings, as he had come to a stop in front of Megatron's cell.

His enemy's face was blank and calm, as if he were on the very edge of recharge. He felt the flash of a thought, not entirely his own, of keeping the Decepticon leader in this state. Fearless and content, and the thread wound around itself with the knowledge of all the trouble it could circumvent, and his spark grew still with disgust as a bleeding seam in the matrix grew bright with excitement. That must be Zeta Prime. Optimus deleted the thread without hesitation, and was left with only a dull ache.
"Will there be any ill effects?"

"The concentration was low enough that it'll wear off in a day or so for most of them."

"And there weren't any problems with the seekers?"

"We had to have Skyfire restrain Starscream and Dirge, but everyone else was fine. The femmes say they had to move Sunstorm out of his shared cell but since their setup was different and they have access to Shockwave's lab, they were able to pump cryo-gas directly into the sealed room and then vent out the excess. The Rainmakers have a few superficial plating burns from him, but they realized what was happening early enough that no one was badly damaged."

"Considering the circumstances, will there be long-term affects if we leave them in stasis? I know the aerialbots wanted to go flying, and that Astrotrain seems to be in good enough condition for now, but I'm unsure of waking them."

Hoist shrugged. "They'll need to go flying sometime, Prime. Stasis won't automatically remove the problem. At best it might buy them a few more days of normalcy before it starts all over again. But I'm only guessing at this," he added quickly. "Skyfire or Powerglide might know better. But just going off of what he added to the medical pads..."

"Of course." They'd have to complete construction of the transmitter fence before waking them, then. "For now, keep an optic on Astrotrain. Make sure the mechs in stasis remain so until we can agree that waking them would be to their benefit. And make sure the mechs coming off the cryo-gas don't suffer any nasty side effects. We'll just have to keep working on construction efforts for now."

Hoist nodded, turning his attention back to the datapad in hand, and Optimus left feeling uneasy. Despite there being no specific reason they couldn't keep the Decepticons in cells for quite a while, he felt as if they were running out of time, and hoped they could at least house a few of the mechs sooner rather than later.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I hope chapter four is up to standard (?). If you see any grammar/spelling mistakes, please let me know so I can fix them. My tumblr is here http://copperzealot.tumblr.com if there's something you want to say and don't want to do it here.
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Optimus needs help and Jazz has a very important conversation. Fortunately, Prowl is around.

Chapter Notes

Quick warning: there are mentions of past torture in this, but there are no details nor does it refer to any specific incident.

The list, or List, as he mentally referred to it, was taking forever to scrape together. He had unceremoniously been placed in charge of pairing off the Decepticons and Autobots, no matter how much he thought it would be better for someone else to do it. Ironhide had shrugged and offered him the datapad, saying no one else could be trusted to be completely objective. He'd like to think he could manage to make the right choices, with some input from his soldiers, but truthfully there were a few Cons he just didn't know very well. Engrossed in his work, he failed to notice the small red mech standing in his doorway, and only looked up once they spoke.

"I need to talk to you."

At five in the morning stood Cliffjumper, a full hour and a half before he was required to get up.

"I'm surprised you're up this early, but I suppose you felt this was important. Come in." He turned the datapad in hand off, pushing it to the side, knowing it might not put the other in a good mood. He realized it was a futile move, as Cliffjumper already looked uneasy as he closed the door behind him and came to stand before his desk. His fists were clenched and he ignored the chair.

However, his words didn't feel angry. "I still think this is a bad idea. I know everyone said it's already been agreed on, but Optimus, how is this going to work? We'll be in recharge, completely unprotected! Even if we manage to make the walls and doors strong enough, what if they attack us during the day? What if they stop refueling, or start breaking things? What about the ones - about Vortex, what are we going to do when some of them just don't 'get better' or whatever you wanna call it? Do we just stay with them until offlineing? They've killed I don't know how many Autobots, they're the reason we're even in this blasted war! And is it true that Shockwave has even experimented on other Cybertronians?"

Shocked by the sudden torrent of words, Optimus lifted a hand and said, "wait." Luckily Cliffjumper actually heard him over his increasing volume and stopped. "How old are you?"

The red mech's expression turned mullish. "Why does that matter?"

"I haven't looked at any of the files in quite a long time, but am I correct that you're just a bit younger than Bumblebee?"
Cliffjumper scowled. He had always been a bit sensitive about his age, partially due to the fact that he didn't look like one of the younger mechs. In truth he was slightly older than Bluestreak, and they were saved from being the youngest only by the recent arrivals of the aerialbots and dinobots. "Yes."

"I thought so. I understand your reservations, but try to understand; the Cybertron you lived on was very different from the one I did. Before Megatron was created, our planet went through many tumultuous times, including temporary enslavement by an alien race known as Quintessons. After they were chased away, the first Golden Age began, but it was a time when only a few lived in luxury and the rest were able to survive only by keeping to their very rigid functions. Cybertronians were created en mass to be used as manual labor, and few were allowed the privilege of personal choice. They often died in terrible conditions, and others were created only for use in warfare. Before there were Autobots, there were Cybertrons, and before Decepticons were the Destrons. Their processing capabilities were somewhat limited compared to ours, but they were very much sentient and quite intelligent. One of the mechs from that time is Shockwave. Another is Alpha Trion. The legal restrictions on wealthy bots creating mechs and femmes for their own personal reasons were just being crafted when Megatron was built. Even then, I'm not sure how stable he was, but I promise you he was not a monster. I don't believe there is anything inherently cruel in him, only that as a newbuild he reacted to the environment around him, and that perhaps his frame and spark did not take well to those conditions."

He hesitated, not wanting to make any promises or offer analysis when he was only working on what his instinct - so easily lead astray by what he wished for - told him. "I am working to make sure that when we are living with the Decepticons, it will be those who will, at the very least, have personalities that mesh with our own as much as possible. I won't place you with Vortex, because I don't believe you would be good for each other. As for Shockwave..."

Again, he hesitated. He was only a bit older than Megatron, and his memories of Shockwave before and throughout the war were spotty at times.

"Prime?"

"As for Shockwave, you are right. He has experimented on his fellow Cybertronians. But I remember those reports, and the ones he experimented on were Decepticons who had presumably consented to the procedures. Perhaps they were pressured into it, but there are no records of him stealing mechs and femmes off the street, if that was what you were thinking of."

"Is it true that he's the one who created the serum that killed so many of the femmes off?"

He wondered who the minibot had been talking to, or if these theories had been floating around before full war broke out. "No. He did take advantage of it by advising the seekers to strike the strongholds they were primarily in charge of. And truthfully we still don't know what killed so many of the femmes - a virus, a disease, some form of alien contagion - but be aware that there were Decepticon femmes as well. There might still be, in the deep reaches of space for all he knew. The sudden pandemic that had attacked their femme soldiers - already so few in number - had been horrifying and baffling, but he knew that whatever it was, the Decepticon forces had suffered their losses as well.

With his ideas more or less rebuffed, Cliffjumper appeared less worried. "Who am I going to have to live with?"

"I don't know yet. I'll speak with everyone before the match ups are permanent and try to accommodate where I can."

The newly relaxed expression turned to thoughtful in an instant. "I don't think there are any Cons I'd
"You wouldn't be alone. I'm not saying the minibots must room together, but I know you all often get along. If there are any Autobots you would want to room with, consider who they might be and speak with them. This is going to be a rough adjustment period for many of us, and I'd prefer to keep reassignments to a minimum."

The red mech nodded, and now thoughtful had turned to consideration; he left without much fuss and Optimus was left alone. Alone, with a list of names and hardly any strategy of how to match them to each other. He picked up a stylus and wrote the few things he did know.

**Skyfire; command trine.**

**Aerials; one of the seeker trines?**

*(Gestalts to other gestalts, groups to gestalts?)*

He paused, hovering over the datapad, then made one more note.

**Optimus; Megatron.**

Perfect. Now only three dozen more soldiers to go through.

"And you're sure it can carry twenty-five full-sized mechs through, correct?"

"It's not the size that matters, it's - "

"The motion of the ocean?" Wheeljack asked, helmfins winking at his fellow scientist.

Perceptor wilted. "It's the overall mass of them."

"The mass or the - "

"Okay!" Grapple said, hopping between the two to address their Prime. "The point is, we got it. We can safely transport everyone ready to work on construction, as well as *some* of the supplies. Only issue is, we haven't finished the mods for the big loads. The Decepticons mainly used the spacebridge to transport energon back to Cybertron, but as energon isn't really all that heavy..."

"I understand. I believe that much of the equipment we need from Earth is still being gathered by our human allies, and the space still needs to be cleared. I will make sure that those who wish to help with demolition and cleanup will be notified."

It felt like everything was alternately speeding up and slowing down; one moment he was being notified there was some new time-sensitive issue with the Decepticons, the next he was being informed a crucial part of their plan was now completed. It pressed down on him once again, the knowledge that very soon, they would be living with the Decepticons. He would be living with Megatron, and unless he wanted every morning to begin with a grappling, the power dampeners would have to be modified for long-term use. He didn't want them weak or tired, or suffering side-affects, but neither did he want his soldiers to have to defend themselves should a confrontation arise.

And arise they would. Optimus set off to find those who were willing to begin construction.

Turned out it was not terribly difficult, because most of his soldiers were bored out of their minds. They enjoyed the long stretches between battles well enough, but living with the Decepticons
sleeping below them set most of his mechs on edge just enough to ruin their usual light-hearted fun."

"For those who wish to begin demolition - " he began, and mechs flocked to him. Huffer actually bounced off his hip, startled but no less eager to be one of the first volunteers. "Ahem. Currently volunteers would only be knocking down buildings and clearing the area needed for our future construction. Should you clear the area early, then Elita and her soldiers will help guide you through the stable areas to move the materials that have been found."

A chorus of "me!"s and "I volunteer!"s. He almost felt a little bad - everyone was too tense to leave the base for very long to relax. "Alright, then. Grapple, Huffer, Wincharger, Sideswipe, Sunstreaker, Hoist... Ironhide?"

His friend, who had been standing silently to the side, shrugged. "If yer not needing me here, I'll be fine with going to Cybertron. The sooner we get the buildings up the better."

Optimus nodded. "Anyone can pass back through the space bridge and return to their work here if they want, as long as I am alerted. I would like to keep tabs on where everyone is, just in case."

The few chosen mechs whooped and the twins high-fived each other. Not half a breem later the group had left for the spacebridge, with Ironhide promising to check in with the command staff every so often. Optimus almost wanted to go with them and hand the list matter off to Prowl. Heavy lifting and directing others felt like a vacation at this point. If only someone more suited to the task were actually present -

"Prime?"

"Prowl! Did you wish to work on construction as well?" Honestly, he had never pegged Prowl as the type to prefer manual labor over datawork, but Jazz and Bluestreak had both voiced their concerns over his battle computer dealing with future living arrangements and the Decepticons currently imprisoned below them.

His tactician frowned. "No. I wanted to ask you if you had a working list of Autobot-Decepticon groups yet, and if I might be able to see them."

"Oh..." Prowl would not be impressed by his lack of ideas. "I admit it has been something of a struggle to place them together. I only have a few groups."

"A few is better than nothing," Prowl insisted.

Ten minutes later, staring down at a mostly-blank datapad, he looked a bit less confident, but Prowl was nothing if not professional. "We have been making progress much more quickly than I expected. The sooner the Autobots are given their options and can offer their feedback, the sooner we will be able to work toward a compromise that can please everyone."

"We'?" Optimus asked, hopeful and a little amused.

His friend shrugged. "I noticed you did not seem very confident and truthfully I expected you might like some help. Even so, you are still the best choice for placement, because you will be fair and take into account what everyone needs, even if you can't satisfy what they will want. Here," he leaned forward and picked the datapad up, tapping away, "let's start with a list of the two for now."

Together, abiding by the rules that had been discussed, Optimus slowly began to pair off the various cybertronians. He dithered over who the minibots would go best with, and worried over the twins. Blaster and Soundwave seemed obvious, as they had a rather mild but respectful-ish rivalry, but would their casseticons be able to live together? Especially with how Soundwave's casseticons
could be so possessive? Were the aerialbots too young to live alone with older mechs who might try to manipulate them? Surely they would be insulted if they were left out, but the Prime was considering it as a possibility. Who would room with Bluestreak and the Stunticons?

On and on he worried, even as he typed out each name and group and linked them all up. He only occasionally brought up his reservations with Prowl, knowing the other had probably already considered many of his worries. Mostly he knew he would never get the list down if he tried to do it perfectly the first time.

At the end of the job, Optimus looked over the list with clear appreciation. "We've made progress, and it wouldn't have happened without your help."

Prowl waved his comment away, embarrassed. "I barely assisted."

"Still, it was much needed. I think feedback should be the next step."

"I would advise you to approach them in small groups, or even pairs if possible."

"Why? You don't think a second room full of shouting, upset Autobots is a good idea?" Prime asked, smiling at the mental image. It was a lot easier to look back on that nerve-wracking day now that he had their acceptance.

"I think many of them would like to discuss their decisions in private. It will only slow things down if larger groups get into arguments over who they'll room with at this point."

"Sound advice," he offered, smiling at the thought of his mechs huddled in groups in their shared rooms, furiously discussing which Decepticons they found most tolerable. He privately thought it was a good thing Skyfire had been open to rooming with the command trine, since he had no intention of allowing the aerialbots to be alone with Starscream, let alone the entire head trine. As for feedback - "I have an idea. However, it flies in the face of what we just discussed."

Prowl sent him a look of deep suspicion. "How so?"

"Well, it occurred to me that using one of the larger monitors where others could check who they would be rooming with would be more efficient, and the suggestions could be left so I could - "

"A terminal."

"Pardon?"

"Instead of a public screen it can be a terminal any Autobot can access on their own. That would be much faster and give them a better sense of privacy."

"What would I do without you?"

Prowl sniffed, a theatrical affectation he had picked up from the many movie nights Bluestreak and Rewind liked to set up. "I imagine you would have a riot on your servos, but that is only speculation."

"A terminal, huh?"

Cliffjumper scowled at Gears. "Obviously it's a terminal. Who's going to check it first?"

"Beauty before brats," Sunstreaker proclaimed as he sauntered past them, earning an offended "no!"
from Cliffjumper as he tried to ram himself in front of the terminal before the yellow twin.

"I'd say I'm surprised, but then I would be lyin'," Jazz said, watching the two flail at each other. "Haven't even seen the offers yet and we're already fighting."

"Cliffjumper doesn't need Cons to fight," Bumblebee pointed out, peeling away from the small crowd as they egged on the others. "Who do you want to room with?"

"Aw, see, I was thinking Soundwave wouldn't be so bad, could blast some tunes and chat for a bit, but I heard Prime was already considering Blaster for the role. Makes sense, with the cassettes being their own handful."

"You could still ask for him!"

"I could, but honestly being stuck inside all the time doesn't suite me. I was thinking I could just be a floater, checking on others and seeing how they were all handling the situation. Could always drop in on Blaster and give him a break if he needed... who're you gunnin' for, Bee?"

"Oh - well, actually I thought the command trine would be interesting to room with - "

"You're kidding," Jazz said, smile flat.

" - but I know Skyfire already has them, so I'm not sure. I know there are more seekers on Cybertron, but I think the femmes are going to room with them? I'm not sure. I guess I don't care, since I've never really been very interested in any of the Cons." He shrugged. "I'm not worried about it."

By sheer number alone, the minibots got to the terminal first. Sunstreaker and Cliffjumper were wrestling awkwardly on the ground with Warpath trying to help, and Sideswipe had been buried under Gears, Huffer and Wincharger. Beachcomber and Seaspray were busily poking at the terminal, and so Bumblebee relocated to their sides.

"Who'd you get? Anyone good?"

Seaspray burbled in amusement, and perhaps a little panic. "Astrotrain."

"Really? Wait - " The scout reached between them and typed in his group. "Oh! Uh. Blitzwing."

"Are you kidding me? Prime gave you lot the big ones?" Sideswipe cried, offended purely for the sake of having something to yell about.

"They're gonna squash you flat!" Sunstreaker said before Cliffjumper 'accidentally' kneed him in the face.

"Better they give them to us than you two!"

From the doorway, Prowl watched the crowd of Autobots bicker and chatter, trading places at the terminal so they can take their friend's position to argue with one of the twins. It didn't feel like a real fight was going to break out any time soon, but he stayed regardless, nerves making him jittery no matter how he tried to logic them into submission. Bluestreak had refused to hear a single word against his decision to room with the Stunticons. Prowl had told him he didn't have to room with any of them if he really didn't want to, but the notion that he would willingly sit out when he couldn't do anything besides patrol was too much for him. He stubbornly clung to staying with the Stunticons, and Prowl knew why; they were newbuilds, neither aware of nor responsible for any actions taken during the war. They were unstable, impulsive, glitched and even cruel, but they were not guilty to
Bluestreak.

Jazz slid into place next to him, wearing a knowing smile. "Any luck with Blue?"

"None at all. Maybe if you - "

"Pfft. If he's not going to listen to his big brother, he's not going to listen to me."

Prowl made a face at the human term, but let it go. "He likes you."

"Lots of bots like me. Doesn't mean they all listen when I say something. Besides, I'm sure you have a backup plan."

"Smokescreen said he'd be alright with living with Bluestreak and me, since he doesn't have any particular preferences for the Decepticons he'll be living with."

"Smokescreen? I didn't think they even got along."

Prowl shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. "There were some... personal issues in the beginning, but they're past them now. " Deciding a change in subject would be best, he asked, "do you know who you will be rooming with?"

From the corner of his optic, Jazz's smile grew. "Figured I'd sit this one out, you know? Being restricted to one space ain't really my thing."

Staring straight ahead, Prowl focused every internal sensor towards the other mech, noting his temperature, field, lax body language, the smooth and casual cadence of his words. As if he had turned down an offer to go racing over watching holovids instead. But this was not a simple question of what he would like to do for an hour, or a joor, or a day. And so Prowl turned inward, shifting through threads and discarding each unlikely reason until he was left with three. He dropped the third, considered 'concerned his presence would make it difficult for them to relax and bond to their assigned Autobots' before dismissing that as well. It was not an unlikely outcome, but it was not the root.

Jazz was an interrogator. Jazz was the interrogator, and certainly successful at it. His methods - Prowl had only supervised a few times (behind reflective glass, where no one could see him) before Optimus had noticed the effects and pulled him from the job. Jazz was good at what he did. Ironhide had taken a few stabs at it, but his spark was not in it. He was too old, ironically, too aware of his days living and working near warframes to really distance himself from the present. Jazz was younger, born closer to the beginning of the war. He was not sure how relevant it was, but it was one of the few clues he had, because Ironhide hated Decepticons and he loved fighting but he could not do what Jazz could.

Jazz was not unaffected by what he had to do, but Prowl still was not sure if he was quicker to recovery or just better at removing himself from what he had to do.

(He had seen Optimus take Jazz aside after an interrogation, once, one hand on his arm and bent over him, whispering something too quiet for Prowl to pick up. Jazz's face had been so perfectly blank, as if carved out of durasteel, as if he were an empty whose frame had not realized it's brain module had rotted through it's core and it was already dead - )

(He remembered the last time Optimus had taken him from the observation room, one massive arm around his shoulder, the other holding his hand, how he couldn't stop shaking and did not understand why. This was necessary. This was needed, they needed that information, why could he not stop why could he not see and Optimus had leaned close and told him it was not his fault, it was good that... )
he felt this way and he still did not understand why.

Prowl watched as Sideswipe, wrapped up in minibots and dragging himself forward anyway, reached the terminal. Bumblebee, Beachcomber, and Seaspray were moving around him to join the others, pretending they were going to join the fray but really just letting Sideswipe pass. He studied the play-fighting, turning over the situation and coming to the exact same conclusion, and then some.

No, he thought, it wouldn't be good if Jazz ended up rooming with a Decepticon he had interrogated, or even a Decepticon who was aware of his activities. Not for the Decepticon and not for Jazz.

"I have been going over the numbers with Optimus," he finally said, "and recently Wheeljack and Perceptor have been working with Skyfire to create power dampeners that can be activated remotely. By my estimates it has greatly decreased the need for one on one for many of the Cons, freeing us up to focus on other issues, like the reconstruction and security. It should prevent the outbreak of fights, if it is used properly, but we are still writing the rules for -"

Jazz tapped the back of his hand, and he stopped. "I know."

"What do you mean you know? How could you know? Only Optimus and I have been working on -"

"I know," Jazz said again, with that infuriating smile, and Prowl was suddenly overcome with the need to smack his partner across the back of his helm. Of course he knew. Jazz always knew.

Across the room, Sunstreaker threw Cliffjumper off him and dove for the terminal just as Sideswipe said "the Coneheads?" in an incredulous tone and Jazz demanded if he and Optimus really put them with seekers of all mechs and Prowl smiled because he had slipped out the doorway when Jazz had turned his attention elsewhere. Sure, Jazz could catch him, and probably would later, but Prowl had managed for a full five point three seconds to convince himself that everything might not be completely doomed to fail. Optimus would take care of them all and Prowl would make sure their leader would have access to every resource in existence to do so, he would dedicate himself to figuring out every measure and countermeasure and backup plan to every backup plan and maybe. Maybe this ridiculous hope that their leader carried might lead to something good after all.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Bluestreak is doing his best.

For the last three weeks, Optimus struggled to recharge. He worked tirelessly to create the best possible grouping list and met with every bot who wanted a moment of his time to speak with him, and reviewed resource reports that were thankfully compiled for him, and checked in on the Decepticons when he could, but come the night cycle he failed to sink into sleep. He knew he needed to, knew Ratchet would be furious if he knew Optimus would eventually grow bored and return to reviewing the List, but he needed everything to go as smoothly as possible. For the last three weeks he was not able to rest, but he was able to finally feel comfortable enough to declare the List 'finished' after so many changes.

Allowing himself to be tentatively satisfied, Optimus called for a meeting.

"Are you swaying?" Ratchet demanded, arms crossed as they watched the rest of the Autobots file back into the same meeting room as last time.

Optimus nearly sat down before remembering there was no seat for him, and instead straightened his spinal strut. "Of course not," he whispered, counting heads and avoiding the chief medical officer's optics. He confirmed that there were no more issues with which Decepticons the various Autobots would be staying with, or the assigned duties of those who would not be staying with Decepticons, and finished off with a polite, "who would like to lead the conversation?"

His dear friend Ironhide took the chance offered. "So who goes first?"

"What d'ya mean 'first'?"

Ironhide shrugged. "Well we can't ALL go an' run off to our new apartments, they're not done building 'em yet. So we need to figure out who gets first pickin's and who gets to stay behind."

"We haven't even started construction on the fence, yet, so please keep that in mind," Perceptor said.

"We can't go yet," Cliffjumper proclaimed, jumping into the half-klik of silence. "We have too much construction to do, so obviously Grapple and Hoist have to stay too."

"He's right, we have to make sure enough is in place so we can do the bulk of supervising from the new apartment," Grapple said.

Bluestreak had to yell a bit to be heard over the muttering that broke out over who would be best kept for rebuilding. "Aid, you've been with them the most, what do you think?"

First Aid's visor flashed in surprise at being addressed and he sat up straighter. "The Stunticons are doing the worst of the ones still awake, and there is one other issue," First Aid admitted. "But we already dealt with it this morning. Vortex began to show signs of flight sickness, but we were alerted early enough that he agreed to let us put him in to stasis."

"The helicopter? Why did it take so long to affect him?" Optimus wished the medic had told him first
thing, but thought it must have happened too quickly to stop and alert him.

"I think the programming of the seeker model and non-seeker aerial might be different enough that one can handle being grounded for longer. It could also be psycho-somatic, although that's just a theory. But we were out of stasis pods, so he is currently wrapped up in the stasis nets and being monitored in the medbay."

"I see. And the rest of his gestalt didn't give any trouble?"

"Not really!" The medic's mood rose instantly, like a buoy on the rising tide. "I think they were worried and Vortex wanted to go in to stasis. I only recommend that someone makes sure he and his gestalt arrive at the same time to their new home."

*Home.* The word sparked a feeling of unease for just a moment, and Optimus swallowed down the solvent in his mouth before speaking. "Thank you for the update, First Aid. Please don't hesitate to ask for assistance if the shuttles show signs of flight sickness."

"Of course! But the reason I wanted to tell you all that... we are now out of stasis nets. We had to use all of them for long-term stasis, and they keep having to be recharged so we connected them into one big stasis blanket, and Streetwise is out of the right supplies to make more. So to answer the original question, the Stunticons are the worst off right now, and I would recommend they go first."

"Someone could go to Cybertron and get more supplies..." Sideswipe pointed out.

"That is true, but if a group is going to be moved, I think it should be them."

"Prowl, you can continue your work from the new location with Bluestreak and Smokescreen, can't you?"

His adviser frowned. "I suppose so, as long as I have some time to compile everything."

"That means we wouldn't be able to do anything!" Smokescreen said, sounding put out.

"Not for construction, no, but all three of you would be in charge of monitoring the Stunticons. I trust everyone here has read the new guidelines and emergency plans," he said, turning from the gray mech to briefly catch the optic of every Autobot. "This is not something that can be taken lightly, or shirked when you grow bored of it. This is not guard duty you can swap with others at your leisure. I won't pretend this isn't extremely risky, but I will say that I believe it is entirely worth the risk. You know I don't speak without reason."

"We should at least ask the Stunticons, then," Smokescreen said. "Maybe they don't want to go yet. Or maybe they do, I don't know, but it'll be easier to move them if they agree, right?"

"After we're finished talking here, you three can go speak with them."

Optimus had not expected to get a lot of mechs moved today, but he was satisfied with what they did. They plotted out a schedule for when certain groups could afford to leave and made sure to prioritize construction for their buildings. Bluestreak, Smokescreen and Prowl were content with being the first to settle in, and the rest were relieved they didn't yet have to begin living with the Decepticons.

Bluestreak made a beeline for the lower levels, where the cells were located. Prowl diligently followed, and realizing he would be better equipped if he met with the Stunticons too, Smokescreen reluctantly followed. Optimus, after promising Ratchet to get some recharge in a bit, brought up the rear. He figured it was his duty as leader, but had to admit that he was curious. How would the first
meeting confirming to the Decepticons that yes, they were going to be moved into new housing for the foreseeable future?

"How angry do you think they'll be?" Bluestreak asked.

"Given their tempers in battle, I'm betting the answer is 'extremely'," Smokescreen replied.

"Prowl, do you know - ?"

"When the remote power dampeners will be ready for use? Wheeljack said they would be ready in just a few days. At this point I believe they're focused on testing to make sure it's safe."

"Yeah, on himself," Smokescreen said, before his optics lit up. "Ooh, do you think - "

"Need I remind you that gambling is prohibited on the Ark?" Prowl asked.

"It's not gambling," the blue mech said, expression shifty. "It's just... recording what people think is going to happen... and then reminding them they were totally wrong."

"No."

"One would think you would find something more interesting to bet on." Optimus pointed out.

Prowl let out an accusatory "Prime!" as the other two snickered. The moment of levity disappeared once they found themselves in front of the door to the holding cells. Bluestreak didn't give anyone time to second-guess themselves; he hiked his door panels up and wrenched the door open, no doubt startling the Decepticons inside.

"What do you want?" Motormaster snarled, glaring mulishly at the group of Autobots standing before him. Clearly they had come to harass him, and probably his dumb brothers too.

Bluestreak looked to Prowl for guidance. "Uh..."

"We're going to be moving you and your gestalt to the new apartment."

"Like hell you are!"

"I'd like to see you try!"

"Come and get us, Autobot!"

Bluestreak placed on hand over his mouth, and it took a moment for Optimus to realize he had just hide a smile. "I don't suppose you noticed, but we sort of already did."

This did not go over well with the Stunticons, and they all jeered at the three Praxians. The trio looked less than impressed. "We did not come here to ask for your permission," Prowl finally spoke once their voices died down, "we're going to move you within the next few days."

Bluestreak had wondered past the cells to check on the separated stunticons. Dead End looked suitably unconcerned, or maybe just bored. It was hard to see his face, and he was sitting behind Mixmaster. Breakdown was, of course, still unconscious. They only had three stasis field chips and one had gone to the femmes, but at least they were reliable, and given his paranoia Bluestreak thought it was for the best if he just stayed in stasis until they all reached the apartment. Drag Strip was suitably interesting, if only for a klik - he had moved from his previous nonstop sulking to trying to arm wrestle Hook. Wildrider, on the other hand, did not look well. He had a great big dent on the side of his face, as if from a punch, and was sitting on the floor of his cell glaring furiously at the
wall. His fingers scraped at his knees without much notice, and Bluestreak could see the slight rise and fall of his chassis as he in- and exvented quietly.

Thundercracked scowled at him and said, "take a picture, sniper," before moving in front of the gray newbuild.

He moved back towards Prowl just in time to see Motormaster try and fail to fight his way through the bars to get to the older Praxian. With an audio-searing CRACK of discharged electricity, Motormaster was thrown backwards, tripped over the startled form of Swindle, and smashed into the back wall.

"You should conserve your strength, Motormaster, for the real fight," Megatron announced, not an ounce of reproach in his voice.

"Do you need First Aid - "

"No, I don't." The newbuild leader looked furious, but only a dark scorch mark across his shoulder and arm could be seen. First Aid would fuss, anyway.

Don't know why we even bothered. He stared at the message Smokescreen had sent him. The other mech was right; they didn't need the agreement of the Decepticons, or even to warn them. It's not like they would politely acquiesce to being knocked out for transportation. He heaved a sigh and turned to Motormaster. "Well, we just thought we'd keep you updated."

He received a sneer. "Shove it up your exhaust pipe, Autobot."

Prowl stiffened, the need to retort clearly visible, but Bluestreak patted his shoulder. "I'm gonna go... help Wheeljack with stuff."

I'm sorry, Bluestreak.

Don't be, Prowl. I didn't expect anything nice. We'll just have to get used to it. He didn't look back, not even when he heard Smokescreen huff and follow along behind him.

Once they were out of the room, he said, "maybe this was a mistake."

"What, you mean the whole thing? But Optimus - "

"I don't mean that, I just meant those idiots. What're we going to do with them?" Smokescreen jerked a thumb over his shoulder back down the hallway. "It's bad enough they're a bunch of glitched newbuilds, but they're all fucked up on whatever it was Megatron told them about us."

"So? They don't care what he says. Even if he told them all the - the really bad stuff from way back when - those're just stories to them."

"Well they clearly hate Autobots, so some of it got through to them."

Smokescreen had just enough vorns on Bluestreak to register as "older than me" in his mind, and hearing those words from someone older was strangely disheartening. "Optimus said it would be hard." Primus, he hated this. He was trying so hard to think of it as a mission. The difficult kind with no end in sight and a lot of waiting around and hoping nothing too terrible happened.

Either Smokescreen got bored of the topic, or he realized Bluestreak needed a distraction, because he slapped him on the shoulder and said, "let's go see if we can't reignite a prank war between the minis and the twins."
"But I already said I was going to go help Wheeljack with lab stuff."

"How, by handing him stuff that's right next to him? Aerials have got it covered. Let's go bug Sunny and Sides. Have you noticed how moody they're getting lately? They need a diversion, Blue. NEED."

Scrap, he thought. He hadn't even noticed. "Yeah, fine, let's go."

Elita carried the camera around with her, treating Optimus to a slightly bumpy view of the inside of their old base. "You're sure? We can wait a bit longer, if needed."

"Two buildings done and I know some of your soldiers are getting restless. If you want to wait, that's fine, but as it is we've already decided Prowl and the Stunticons will be taking one of them."

She hummed. He saw piles upon piles of empty, compressed energon cubes, all lined up neatly along the wall. The base was the dark blue-gray favored by moderately wealthy government or business buildings. She passed Lancer and Greenlight, sitting at an empty minibar, likely on break. He wondered what their base used to be for; a high-end hotel, perhaps? It seemed very sparsely decorated, but he wouldn't be surprised if they took them down for personal use. "I do not like that Shockwave is contained only by stasis... I'll ask the others what they think and get back to you. Is everything alright on the Ark?"

"None of the Decepticons are pleased with moving in with Autobots, but that's to be expected. Motormaster has a few minor electrical burns, but First Aid took care of that. Other than that, it's business as usual."

She made a commiserating noise - business as usual for leaders was sleepless nights and dealing with stressed Autobots, for the most part - and paused to say, "Optimus, I'll call you back, I need to help with something," before hanging up.

Nonplussed, he muttered, "nice talking to you too," before regretfully leaving to help clear some reporters off the mountain side. Some of the humans were rather upset at their future departure. He had assured them they would be able to visit again, but was painfully aware that 'some day' for humans was not the same as 'some day' for Cybertronians. It might be entire vorns before it was safe enough for certain Autobots to leave their homes for any meaningful amount of time. He had no idea how long it would take, and not knowing was painful enough, but Optimus had noticed that many Autobots were using their free time not for relaxing but for spending time with their human friends. Bumblebee was out with Spike, Chip and Carly as often as he could be. Powerglide had taken to flying off to whatever city Astoria was currently visiting. Tracks had all but disappeared in New York, appearing only for his shifts before taking off again.

He would have to have a way for his Autobots to contact their human friends and allies, he decided. Not just to keep in touch with friends, but in case some sort of emergency occurred and Earth needed them. Even if they couldn't all leave, the likes of the Dinobots and Jazz and others could leave their posts and assist.

On top of that, it would be cruel to separate his Autobots from their human friends when he had always tried to encourage such relationships. He made a mental note to see if they couldn't somehow hook up their communication network so they could at least call them whenever they wished.

Shortly, Optimus found Teletraan alerting him to an unlikely number of humans situated outside the Ark. He returned after ferrying reporters and journalists down to the road where their cars were
parked. They were persistent, but getting carried by Optimus Prime could distract even them from their multitude of questions and queries and 'please just one quote' requests. Optimus found just one message waiting for him.

*Moonracer, Lancer and Greenlight said they're ready to move in with Shockwave. Will handle by ourselves. Please send times for when Prowl and Stunticons will be moving in so we can schedule around it. Good night.*

He smiled. Two groups down, twelve to go.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Shockwave wakes up; Prowl, Bluestreak and Smokescreen move in with the Stunticons; Optimus and Megatron have a chat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Shockwave woke, it was to the unnerving sensation of imbalance; his arm was gone, leaving an empty space where it once was. He was laying flat on a perilously soft recharge berth, and the ceiling above him was definitely not the ceiling of his quarters or his lab.

Then Moonracer leaned over him, smiling brightly. "Good morning, Shockwave!"

"What are you doing here, near me?"

"We're in charge of you! Oh, and also, since you were asleep, the Autobots won the war and now we all have Decepticons to look after. Optimus said so. He's got Megatron, by the way. Elita and Greenlight and Lancer are here, too, because they were worried."

He sat up and found that awareness did not fix his issues with balance. "Where is my arm?"

"Your gun arm? Um. We removed it. Does it hurt?"

He rarely felt the stirrings of anger. Now, however, Shockwave was surprised to find he wanted to punch the female Autobot as hard as possible, preferably in her delicate faceplates. "No."

"Good! Do you want some energon?"

"No. I don't believe you, either." He made a grab for her and nearly overbalanced; Moonracer ducked out of his grasp and hovered next to him, hands half-raised in case he fell.

"Do not touch me, Autobot."

Moonracer hovered anyway, but took a small half-step back. "Do you want to speak to Elita? She's here, right now, so..."

"This is not my domicile."

"No, this is our apartment. We made them while all the cons were in stasis."

All the cons? All of them? "You will tell me where Lord Megatron is."

A look of irritation flashed across her face, but was wiped away as quickly as it appeared. "He's with Optimus, of course. They're sharing an apartment too."

"That is the last lie you will ever tell." He lunged, propelling himself off the berth, knowing his weight and motion would carry him with enough force to shatter at least sixty-five percent of her plating. In the last quarter-nanoklik of his pede pushing himself off the berth he felt his joints lock
and his energy levels plunged to a mere ten percent. Instead of crashing into Moonracer he stumbled and toppled off the berthside, and strong hands grabbed hold of his shoulder and collar flaring. Moonracer carefully lowered him down so he was seated on the floor, back against the berth, before backing away to give him some space. His readouts were emergency-orange, reading what had happened as an attack, but his pain receptors had not responded. "You did something to my frame. You are in possession of a remote control - no," he said, visually scanning her frame for any devices and finding none, "a frequency. A killswitch. You have put a power dampener in me."

"It's not a killswitch, it's more like a 'fighting isn't allowed' switch. Everyone living here has access to it. If you try to attack us we'll use it, but it shouldn't have any long term side effects."

"Who is living here? Are all of the femmes going to be here?"

Moonracer marveled at how calm and oddly unangry Shockwave had become. "It's just going to be me, Greenlight, and Lancer. Elita is going to visit to make sure everything is alright, but she won't be living with us. And it's not a lie, by the way," she added, peeved at the outburst. "Optimus is the only one strong enough, except maybe Grimlock, to go pede to pede with Megatron, and he wasn't comfortable having anyone else live with him."

"Does every Decepticon have a power dampener?"

"The ones that need them do." Knowledge is power, and too much knowledge is too much power, she thought, wishing the others were here for this. There wasn't anything Shockwave could do, not about the dampeners or the doors or the walls. There were absolutely no tools or weapons in the apartment - in any of them, truthfully - and every internal modification that he might have had that would let him produce one from his body had been removed. They hadn't realized the 'gun-arm' had so many other finicky bits and pieces in it until it was removed from his frame, and it had lead to another scan for any other tools. Goodbye scalpels and lockpicks and tiny welding tool that came out of his fingertips. "I'm going to give you some space. The apartment is locked and there is no way out except the front door, and only we have the codes to it. You can come out and eat something or look around if you want, but our rooms are locked too and you can't go in there either. Um. I guess you can ask us any questions you have?"

"I see."

She waved goodbye, feeling a little silly, and after a microklik of thought turned her back on him and walked out of the room. She didn't hear him even shift and closed the door behind her with a sigh. Now that he knew about the dampener, she thought he might not try the same thing twice. "Uuuugh. This is going to take a while."

"What is?"

She perked up, glancing around the living room. "Hi Lancer. I just meant this. All of this. Shockwave is going to take for-ev-er. Is Elita gone?"

"She just left. And of course he's going to take a long time. I doubt we'll see any improvement unless Megatron himself makes friends with Prime."

She groaned and threw herself on the couch, rolling over to lay her helm on Greenlight's lap. "He tried to attack me. I used the frequency. So now the element of surprise is already gone."

Greenlight, of course, laughed. "And I didn't even get to see it! Was he mad?"

"Are you hurt?" Lancer moved her legs and sat down, replacing them over her own lap. "And budge
"No. And no." She sighed. "He was mad when he woke up, but I think that was just confusion. And missing his arm."

"Well Ratchet said he'd have a replacement arm soon. Within the week, even."

"I don't want to give him his arm back," Greenlight said. "I think it'll be safer without it. And what does he need two arms for, anyway? He can't do his science anymore."

"We have to give him a replacement arm, Green. It's not ethical to just take one and not compensate or whatever for it. Besides, it was his main weapon. I bet having two regular hands again will throw him off. If we didn't have the PD I bet the three of us could take him in a fair fight."

"I don't know. He did tend to rely on his gun, and since that's gone, and he has the power dampener, and we took out all his extra little tool things... hm. That's not overkill, right?"

"I think it was the right choice," Moonracer insisted. "Shockwave's strength has always been his intellect, and if he somehow managed to get the power dampener out of his frame, he would probably make something dangerous with it. Maybe a stun gun."

"Mm-hm. We can deal with him if he gets angry and tries to take a swing. But if he creates a - I don't know - fuel pump extractor or spark seizure inducer - and gets a hold of one of us, that would be an issue." Lancer nodded to herself, folding a bit of aluminum in her hands into a rough star shape. "I think it should be the heavy hitters and frontliners who get the power dampener installed anyway."

"Bluestreak said Bumblebee said the Cassettes aren't getting one."

"See?" Greenlight pointed at the sharp shooter. "That's reasonable."

"Sure," Lancer agreed. "Megatron, Soundwave, the seekers - but then you've got the Constructicons and the babies. Who wants to put power dampeners on them? At the same time, they're supposed to be dangerous. No one wants to live with a bunch of dangerous mechs, even if they're not the stronger ones, or they're younger."

"Perceptor said they still can't figure out the reprogramming fix for Omega Supreme, let alone the Constructicons. I mean, they're still evil. I know it's not their fault - "

"The Stunticons are unstable," Moonracer added. "Bluestreak offered to room with them because they're younger, and the aerialbots really wanted to be with some of the older fliers, but... you know. Prowl would throw a fit if they didn't have the dampeners, even if Blue didn't mind. And the cassettes don't have access to their earthquake abilities."

Greenlight waved the conversation away, not wanting to dwell on what-ifs. "I think we should let the Autobots figure out their own living arrangements and focus on ours. Does anyone want to change the rooms around before we get settled in? Are we still okay with where Shockwave is?"

"I'm fine."

"Me too."

"Then it's settled. We can reach Elita on the HUB in our rooms if something goes wrong. She sort of already left." Their leader had to help with the other buildings. The sooner they were done, the sooner she would be free to keep an optic on all the Cybertron-based Decepticons. They still had almost a dozen fliers to mind, too. She had locked the door behind her - every door reinforced and over."
barred over from the outside - and left them to their tasks.

"Boo," Moonracer said. "Abandoned by our leader. How will we survive now?"

"I vote we survive by lunch."

"I vote we survive by engex."

"I second that vote!"

"Vetoed!" Lancer swept her hand across the table as if she were sweeping away their suggestions. "Come on, up, I'm starving. Shockwave has to fuel too." They gathered their cubes up, but once again the two science-minded femmes fell back into discussing how they could recreate some of the more interesting foods their kind had once had. Moonracer was looking forward to the attempts, and if she had the vague beginnings of a plan to gauge how Shockwave might react to more friendly overtures, she didn't bring it up with them. At least, not yet.

Elita lurked. She didn't mean to, but since she had preemptively turned down any help from Optimus' group with their move-in and they hadn't bothered her, she figured she could return the courtesy and simply watch the proceedings from afar.

In her defense, this was the first time they had moved an entire gestalt. Newbuilds or not, she wanted to keep an optic on them.

Down below, Smokescreen and Prowl helped carry the offline Stunticons along, while Bluestreak scouted ahead, sniper rifle at the ready as he scanned the surrounding buildings. Unnecessary? Probably. But that never stopped Prowl from telling him to do it.

The minibots were helping carry the sleeping forms of the Stunticons along, navigating the narrow and crumbling walkways with instinctive grace. It was an instinct honed by long years of dangerous construction work, and one they didn't expect to be of much use after the war started.

*Not too late to back out.*

Bluestreak stared at the empty windows that surrounded them, frowning at the message. *I think we're past that point.*

*Come on. I bet if you went to Prowl, cried a bit, he'd let you off.*

*I wouldn't do that!* He paused, then asked, *why, are you having second thoughts?*

*No.*

The thing was, if he did go to Prowl and really played it up, he would get reassigned. Once they had the power dampeners figured out, the Autobots realized they could spare a few people from Con sitting duty to do other things. Not a single Dinobot was rooming with them, and neither was Ironhide or Elita or Red Alert. But the thought turned sour. He didn't want to sit this one out if he could do it, and once they were standing in front of their new home, he knew he had passed the time when he would have taken that chance.

"Is someone going to open the door or what?" Gears demanded.

He jumped forward with a startled "sorry" and punched in the new code. Durasteel bars receded into
the walls, and inside the door itself a four-spoke electrum wheel turned, releasing locking mechanisms. Their own door to the actual apartment would be less complicated, crafted from durabyllium and internally reinforced with a sheet of welded electrum fencing. The front door was the last line of containment if something went really wrong.

"Why the frag did we build stairs but not an elevator?"

"Because we forgot we'd have to carry their afts in the first time."

"Making elevators out of durabyllium and trithyllium and scrap when we've got ten more buildings to get through? They've got legs, they can use the fragging stairs if they ever get out of here - "

"Huffer!"

"What?"

"Would you lot shut it? It's only one flight of stairs!"

"Hey," Bluestreak broke in before things could truly dissolve into actual insults. "Can someone explain to me why we're all one floor up anyway? What's wrong with one story buildings?"

"Less defensible," Brawn grunted, wedging his shoulder against the wall. Sometimes they all forgot Motormaster was nearly as big as Optimus, but Brawn heaved up with his shoulders and they made the turn.

"We have all the Decepticons known to be - ugh! - active. But there is still a chance there might be others - even other beings - Cliffjumper, would you mind - "

The red minibot rolled his optics and slid down and back a bit, bracing Wildrider's back with his own, and the two lifted him up that last two steps without dropping him. Bluestreak rushed ahead to open the final door to their shared rooms, and from there it was over within minutes.

Prowl straightened up with a small crack of spinal strut realigning. "Thank you, Brawn. We'll take it from here."

The minibots left, because there was no reason to linger. Bumblebee patted him on the shoulder and a few tossed off well-meaning 'good lucks', and then they were alone. The door closed with a heavy finality and they turned to study the five figures laid out on the floor.

"So... who do we wake up first?"

"Motormaster."

"What? Why?"

"Yeah, Prowl, if we're going to wake up someone first maybe it should be literally anyone else. Breakdown! His paranoia seems like it might come in handy here. Or Dead End."

"No," he said with calm certainty. "If we can get Motormaster to accept that there won't be any fighting or escape attempts, he can help corral the rest."

"You think he'll help us?"

"I think he'll get annoyed with the others trying to start fights when he knows it won't lead to anything. He is the gestalt leader."
"Not a good one, though."

"True," he conceded, "but he has the highest chance of keeping the others calm. Relatively."

Bluestreak's tone turned suspicious. "How high?"

"Higher than the rest, and we'll leave it at that." Forty-three percent was still higher than twelve, after all.

Prowl hesitated and then leaned over the large mech, pulling a small injector from his subspace. Certainly they could let the drugs wear off naturally, but he didn't imagine it having any positive effects if Breakdown woke up first in an unfamiliar place with the rest of his gestalt still unmoving. The administered dose was very small, directly into an energon line at his wrist, and they stood back to wait.

It happened faster than they thought it would - instead of a gradual awakening they had expected, Motormaster jerked awake all in one go, his vents flaring open and his fans blasting full-force. He lurched to his pedes, a snarl on his face, and swung around. "What - when did you - "

"Motormaster, it's okay! You're safe." Bluestreak didn't know what else to say.

"Your brothers will wake up soon, too. Remember the apartment we talked about?"

He lifted both fists, energy crackling along his seams, denta bared. "We talked about? You're the one that did all the talking."

"The others have already left and the doors are all locked," Prowl broke in, trying to avert an out and out fight. As unpleasant as it was, he needed the Stunticon leader to realize escape was impossible. "Everything except the furniture is built from indestructible materials. The doors can only be unlocked by codes only we have. There's no way out."

"For someone who's supposed to be so smart, you are the dumbest Autobot I've met. Breakdown can - "

"No, he can't. None of you can. None of us can. The only thing that can is hours and hours of construction with the right tools." He sucked in a quick breath, forcing his shoulders to drop and his expression to clear. Newbuilds. They were newbuilds, even if they were dangerous. "You're not in danger. There are no fuel caps here, we're not on rations. There are plenty - "

What there were plenty of, Motormaster would have to wait to find out; Breakdown woke with a low cry, gasping audibly once consciousness forced itself upon him. Prowl jerked back slightly, confused; the Stunticons should be waking gradually, systems crawling online slowly to avoid overwhelming them.

"What happened? Did you drug us? Where are we?"

"Breakdown - "

Motormaster seized him by the shoulders. "Get us out of here, now! Break down the walls."

"He can't - "

Breakdown seemed caught between staring at their new surroundings and staring at his sleeping gestalt mates. "But I - "
"Just do it!"

"Let him go!"

"Shut up!"

Patience, rarely asked for and never rewarded, snapped. Motormaster had released his brother, but something ugly and knotted up was carrying his field outward, spanning out to engulf the others; at the same time he was pulling back his fist, saying, "if you don't - "

Prowl reacted faster, accessing the frequency to the tiny power dampener that had been placed in the sleeping gestalt leader's internals; Motormaster let out a startled grunt and collapsed on a paralyzed Breakdown. Prowl and Smokescreen jumped forward to haul him up, staggering until they could heave him onto the couch.

Motormaster wheezed, joints locked tight and limbs heavier than they had ever been.

Bluestreak crouched down and checked the field of the other Stunticon, who seemed to have passed out. "New plan. We separate them and let them wake up in their own rooms so they can panic in peace." To his surprise, Prowl agreed.

"It won't work."

He squinted at the other leader, curious of the non-sequitur. "What exactly won't work?"

"Your plan." Megatron waved a hand about, motioning to himself, the other Decepticons, the situation in general. "You're going to bore us into submission, aren't you? And then we're going to offer to play nice and get - what? A job rebuilding a planet that's almost completely dead? This is the most irrational - "

"Maybe it won't work," he admitted easily enough. Perhaps they would be trapped in apartment buildings built of durabyllium and durasteel and electrum until their sparks burned out, watching their friends grow old behind screens and the planet grow quieter each passing vorn. He had considered the possibility, and still thought it was not as terrible as what they had before. "Either way, we're going to try."

For a fraction of a klik the look that passed over his old enemy's face was nearly unrecognizable - disgust edged in discomfort and dripping with confusion - before it passed and simple annoyance took over. "You're going to try."

"Yes. Because it is either that or execute almost half of the remaining population. We have no guarantee that there is anyone left, Megatron. Not your justice division or my friend Ultra Magnus and his soldiers - it has been eons. The only other Cybertronians we have seen not on Earth are Shockwave and Elita and their warriors." He paused, and asked, faintly puzzled, "do you want to die?"

"Of course not. As long as we are alive we can get out."

"Fight the good fight," Optimus muttered.

"It is what we were made for, after all."

His tone was sardonic but it still left Optimus feeling bitter. No matter the headache brought on by
the contradictions and accusations and indignant threats, he found himself back down in the holding area, facing Megatron again and again. This time, he had wanted to see how the Decepticon leader was taking the very notable loss of one of his gestalts. Namely, the Stunticons that Vector Sigma had granted them. The human family structure was very rarely applied to Cybertronians, as they only rarely produced newsparks at all. Perhaps if their interfacing habits were tied to reproduction the way the humans were, it would be more frequent, but interfacing had nothing to do with the random occurrence of budding newsparks.

Nearly every single one came from Vector Sigma, with the notable exception of Blaster and Soundwave - and they could never create any frametypes other than cassettes. Regardless, they did have a similar concept of family they applied to themselves; Optimus considered the Autobots his family, and he knew the minibots were very close that way too, as well as the less rare flukes like spark siblings. He knew the Decepticons must have felt something similar too, even if they had long since pushed any tender or vulnerable feelings deep down - or hidden them so well no one had ever noticed it.

He knew that Megatron, fearless warlord or not, would have to feel some sort of beholdenness to the Stunticons. He was legally their commissioner, their guardian, even if he no longer had any say over what happened to them.

Instead of arguments about responsibility towards one's fellow Cybertronians, Optimus gently reminded him, "there's no fighting allowed."

Megatron laughed, of course. They had told none of the Decepticons about the power dampeners that would be installed in them all, wanting to avoid panic, but they would know as soon as they were settled in, whether through active use or explanation.

Dragging Optimus from his thoughts, he said, "I suppose I'll just have to break the rules this time."

"I have no doubt you'll try." That was the greatest shame of it. No matter what, he was sure they would all try, and it was up to his mechs to make sure they failed. Feeling less than reassured - as it seemed that way every time he came to speak with Megatron - he returned to his endless stream of work for a welcome distraction.

Or at least, he tried. A message popped up on his screen the moment he sat down. Teletraan marked it as coming from Apartment 1, Cybertron.

There was a single picture of Shockwave holding an energon cube. He was seated on his berth, one arm still missing, but looked none the worse. Shockwave is doing okay!!! the text read. No doubt it had been sent by Moonracer.

He felt the amorphous well of anxiety and dread lessen, his shoulders dropping from a tensed position he hadn't realized he had adopted. He had to be stronger than what Megatron threw at him. Strong enough to believe that something good would come from this endeavor. If he couldn't, what right did he have to ask his soldiers to live with their enemies?

Shockwave says hi!

He stared at the new message for a single moment of surprise before it warped into amusement. He did not doubt that Shockwave had said something very different than "hi".

Tell him I wish him a good day, and that once the others are in their own apartments he can call and talk with them with supervision.
Of course. Thank you for your time. Do not hesitate to contact us if needed. Good day, Optimus Prime.

It seemed Lancer had taken over. Still smiling, he turned to tackle his work, spark lighter than before.

Chapter End Notes

I admit, I sort of forgot to upload the chapter for a bit. That said, feel free to take a guess at future ships/friendships you think might spring up from these particular groups, I'm curious about how people might be reading certain interactions. And of course, feedback is always appreciated. Happy reading!
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Sunstreaker and Sideswipe have some concerns about this whole 'living with Decepticons' plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunstreaker moved rubble. He moved girders and durasteel bars and cleared paths when they had to move wrecked buildings that had spilled onto the roads. It has been hard not to whip out his cleaning cloth the first few times his paint had scuffed, but now he was littered with dirty prints and scrapes, and a single irritating dent in his leg. Once he was done he would lock himself in the washracks, but at this exact moment he would settle for one of the human's car washes. Sunstreaker despised manual labor.

They both did. It was why they had run to the arenas for quick credits when they were younger, at least until a mech in the crowd reported them for underage fighting. (Ironhide never did apologize for that).

But now they were back breaking and hauling and getting filthy. The only reason he wasn't angrier was that it was temporary.

"Done!" Sideswipe tossed the last bar onto the pile, straightening with a grimace. "Let's go, Hoist has the rest of it."

"Finally. I can't believe we're back here."

"I can't believe it looks worse than when we left it."

"Don't. I already accepted we have to live here, I don't want to think about how it looks before then."


A screech cut through the air as he swung a leg over a broken bit of wall and caught the edge. He grit his denta, fighting down the sudden burst of frustration. "I don't hate Earth, I'm just not obsessed with the humans like everyone else."

Sideswipe hummed. Iacon had never been their home, even if they had run there the moment they had left their old jobs in Tarn. They had spent most of their lives in Iacon before the first war, but had lacked the slightest bit of emotional attachment to it the way most bots did. When he was younger Sideswipe used to wonder why until he had other things to worry about.

Iacon was in ruins. Millions of stellar cycles and no one to do maintenance, no one to break down old buildings and build new ones. Millions of structures left to slowly crumble and collapse into each other. Great spires slumped on each other's shoulders, their needle-like points dangling sadly or gone completely. The sturdier, square buildings fared better, with only certain roofs caving in on themselves, and better contained. Cybertron was silent and still. No distant rumble of machinery, no mechanisms passing through. Sideswipe thought it might be similar to how Earth graveyards felt in
horror movies. As far as the optic could see, there were only swathes of shadows tucked around blue tinted architecture.

"So," he said. "The coneheads."

"What about them?"

"We're going to live with them," he reminded his brother.

"So?"

"So we're going to have to figure out what to do when they piss us off."

"You mean when they piss me off."

Sideswipe rolled his optics before shoving a chunk of building out of the way, sending it tumbling down the cliffside. "Right, because I'm well known for my even temperament. When they piss us off, we need to know how to deal with it."

"Go in another room?"

"Something realistic that we would actually do."

"Auuugh! I don't know, Sides, I don't even want to do this! Why did Optimus put us with seekers? Is it supposed to be a test? Is that it?"

"No... no. That's not it." He pinched his nasal ridge. "You know that's not it."

His brother snarled and threw himself against a chunk of stone, shoulders hunched and arms crossed. "Well it feels like it. I fragging hate the coneheads. Especially Thrust."

"At least Skyfire took Starscream and the other two."

"Yeah." Sunstreaker side-eyed him. "Anyone else think that was a little bit odd? Or suspicious?"

"I mean... yes. But who else should they be with? Someone who doesn't want to deal with them?"

His brother shrugged, already disinterested.

Realistically, what could they do? Options, options... "We'll put it off. Go in last. Second to last," he added when his brother opened his mouth to object.

"Before the minibots, if possible. They'll never shut up."

"Well, think of it this way. We won't have to deal with them once we're in the apartment."

Sunstreaker grimaced, but detached from the rubble to walk with Sideswipe. "Traded one pain in the aft for another. Perfect."

Procrastination would be their salvation. If Sunny was frustrated enough to reclassify it as 'cowardice', he kept it under the hood for Sideswipe's sake. The red twin preferred to think of it as strategizing. They were evaluating their options, not avoiding responsibilities. And for Sunstreaker to willingly go back and move scrap and break down buildings and get scratched and scuffed every day showed what his reticent words would not; he had no idea what to do once they were face to face with the coneheads.
So they volunteered, and they worked.

Two days later Sideswipe overheard interesting news and immediately ran to his brother.

"HEY."

"Fuck!" The buffing rag and thankfully empty detailing paint went down to the floor. "You son of a glitch!"

"Guess what I heard."

"You're a crankshaft? And you're so lucky that was the black."

"Shut up. That too, but shut up. Prowl was talking about moving them so they're on Cybertron."

"Them who? The seekers?"

"Yeah. Said there's more stuff there they can use. Stasis scrap."

Sunstreaker groaned. There was a small, uneven line of thin gold paint around the bottom of his right optic, and Sideswipe took the brush from his hand. He touched the brush to the inner corner and gently traced along the lower ridge, filling it in and smoothing it out. "Thanks."

"I got it." He switched it out for the other brush and drew a line of black across the top shutter, adding a tiny wing to the corner. "There. Now you're perfect."

"I'm always perfect." Satisfied, he tucked the cosmetic paint away. "Now what did you say? The seekers are gone?"

"Hoist and Grapple have more nearly finished apartments done than they were expecting. So many bots have been working we're ahead of schedule."

"Frag."

"About that. Do you want to - ?"

"No. Wait, what are the minibots doing?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Even so, he was wracking his brain to try and recall who they even had. The triple changer and the shuttle - those were probably low priority. And the minibots were doing most of the actual building. "So... ahead of schedule or not, I don't think they can spare them. So they won't be going until all the buildings are almost done, at least. We still have time."

"Fraggit, let's wait. I want to go out before we're locked up for who knows how long."

They still had no idea what to do. Maybe they would figure it out before their time was up, maybe not. But his brother was right; they had to get as much free time in as they could. "Let's go racing."

"Sides, I just fixed my paint."

"On the paved roads, then. They're cleaner."

Sunstreaker had no arguments there, and truthfully, Sideswipe knew he wanted to go. He felt better, less on-edge, if he could burn some fuel every now and then. He allowed his brother his grumbles and remarks, his field to stretch and tangle until it meshed comfortably with his own. They cruised slow and easy over the dirt paths until they reached the city, and then the highway was in view and
their engines gave twin revs of excitement.

To the next city over?

Race you there! Sideswipe twisted around him, diving into the open space left by the other cars. His brother tore after him, cursing and laughing all the way.

Chapter End Notes

I love the twins so much I gave them three emotionally stunted but still functional Coneheads that they didn't want.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Astrotrain wakes up in his new home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Is it true you and your friends carried the entire Stunticon team?"

Cliffjumper snorted. "We did. Dumbafs."

Skyfire adjusted the mech in his arms, making sure their neck and helm was propped up on his shoulder. Astrotrain's field remained short-ranged and slightly fuzzy, and he didn't so much as huff or twitch. This came as a great relief to the minibots, who could charitably be called 'slightly on-edge'. Skyfire, however, was as amiable as ever. "You could have asked me, I wouldn't have minded helping."

"It's not that," Beachcomber said. "Bluestreak, even though he's friends with those two twits, is nice enough that CJ and the others like him."

"We do not," the red mech in question snapped, completely automatically. "He's okay. Bluestreak isn't an aft like them, at least. Even Huffer likes him - but someone had to move the Stunticons and we were strong enough to do it."

"And I bet Brawn did all the heavy lifting," Warpath said, a chuckle in his voice.

Cliffjumper muttered, "show off."

Skyfire didn't look down, but a tiny small crept onto his face. "It was nice of you to send them off, since they'll mostly be stuck inside the apartment now."

A slightly uncomfortable silence ensued, with Cliffjumper's expression caught in a fit of mortification, before he blurted out, "are you really going to be rooming with Starscream?"

The shuttle didn't frown, but his easy friendliness dimmed a bit. "I am."

The red bot didn't appear to know what to do with this information, and so Seaspray jumped in. "Isn't that going to be uncomfortable? Weren't you two friends, or something?"

'Or something' left a lot to the imagination. Skyfire would rather avoid suspicion simply on a practical level. It had taken the scientists a week to feel comfortable around him completely, and mostly that had been the extent of his worry, but he knew there was no such thing as appearing too trustworthy. "Perhaps at first, but even back in the academy, Starscream had had... mercurial moods. He was high strung and very ambitious, and if he got bored he wouldn't say no to a bit of, let's say, off-board experimentation, or even pranks. But after I met him he felt so paranoid... I think it's better if he's living with bots he has a history with, if he's as," he paused, staring into the soft gloom of their planet around him, searching for the right phrase and wanting to preserve his once-friend's privacy at the same time. "Unwell as I think he is. I want to keep an optic on his trine bond, too. And that way I
can make sure they get enough flying in. So I don't really mind if it's uncomfortable."

If the previous silence had been uncomfortable, the next one was downright tense. No matter how innocuous Skyfire had meant his words to be, the minibots were all simultaneously confronted with the fact that Starscream - and undeniably dangerous and outright treacherous mech - had once been a normal student the shuttle was friends with, and that Skyfire was now going to be dealing with the head trine alone.

"You could ask for help," Beachcomber pointed out. "I'm sure Optimus wouldn't - "

Skyfire caught the expressions of worry on their faces, arranged Astrotrain's weight to one arm, and patted Beachcomber on the shoulder. "Don't worry about me. It'll all be fine."

Nonplussed at the sentiment, they all fell into silence until Skyfire brought their attention to their own building. They had passed into the main area they would all be living in, and the buildings were getting closer to being finished every day, but it was entirely surrounded by the wreckage of the city and the many rough paths they had carved into being to transport materials. Their apartment looked much like all the others; two stories tall with three equally spaced windows made of electrum-treated diamond with two trithyllium bars running vertically over each. Yes, the windows would all have a slightly yellow tint to it, and the bars were unpleasant, but the construction bots had insisted they could make a window no Decepticon could use for escape and finally won the right to install them. Natural light was important, even if their planet was almost entirely dark, and they needed to be able to see any incoming threats regardless.

Cliffjumper practically jumped at the door. "Got it!"

By the time Skyfire found himself laying the Decepticon shuttle on the floor of the apartment, the earlier discomfort had dissipated completely, replaced by a mixture of excitement and anxiety. "Well, guess that's that. Sure there's nothing else you need?"

Seaspray burbled sadly to himself. Cliffjumper huffed and crossed his arms. Warpath was busy carefully collapsing his turret into his chest compartment, muttering about the no weapons rule. Beachcomber patted him on the knee. "Thanks, Skyfire. We're good to go. Good luck with your Decepticons."

Skyfire left them standing in a silent line next to an unconscious shuttle. Cliffjumper stretched out one pede to poke his arm and got swatted by Beachcomber for his trouble. "You knock that out! We gotta be responsible about this."

"What! It's perfectly responsible to check and see if he's still functioning."

"Yeah," Warpath snorted, hands on his hips, "'cause that's how you check that; by kicking him."

"I didn't kick - "

Astrotrain's entire frame shuddered, and then he began retching, and they all scrambled several steps back in disgust.

"What - " Cliffjumper began, but Seaspray pushed him aside in panic.

"Put him on his side, quick!"

They all rolled him over, hands braced along his shoulders, hips and legs, watching the unconscious body tremble and shake. When he stopped, Beachcomber said, "you don't think it's flight sickness, do you?"
"I sure hope it's not. We don't have - zap! - the fence set up yet."

Cliffjumper groaned, wrinkling his nasal ridge at the purged energon puddling on the ground. "Figures. Let's get him to the washrack."

Astrotrain woke in bits and starts, his frame coming alive before his processor could catch up. The familiar sound of running water filled his audio receptors, but it was accompanied by the unfamiliar sensation of something rubbing over different parts of his frame. As his optics onlined, a half formed thought of Did we win? floated through his brain module, because he could swear to Primus there were a bunch of minibots standing over him, furiously scrubbing his plating and he really couldn't think of any other reason for it -

And then he could, the past several weeks slotting back into place as he woke up. The taste of half-processed energon on his glossa registered a klik later, and he coughed. He was covered in suds from the neck down, propped up against a wall in what appeared to be washracks. His helm pounded and his frame tingled from the industrious scrubbing all along and under the edges of his plating. No sand or salt deposits here. Just a lot of small, strong hands prying and cleaning around his plating where he'd - vomited on himself? Why didn't he remember that?

It seemed the minibots all realized he was awake at once, and every single one hopped and scrambled to one side, standing along an invisible line. They all stared at each other in wary silence before Cliffjumper stepped forward and said, "alright, listen up - "

Beachcomber snatched the back of his friend's collar and yanked him back in line. "Alright, listen up. You know the rules already, don't you? You lost and we're supposed to, hmm, take care of you and stuff. So how about we just skip the whole fighting part and try to get along. Does that sound good?"

His tone was not as bossy as the red mech's was. On top of that, Astrotrain's helm felt strangely heavy while his frame felt like it wanted to simultaneously lay down and float away. He must have caught something, or perhaps the Autobots made him sick? "Where is Blitzwing?"

The one he actually recognized as Warpath exchanged a look with the fourth, silent mech. "He's with the other minibots in a different apartment."

"You both get four to one," Beachcomber said, actually lifting four fingers as if he thought Astrotrain couldn't count. "And you both have a power dampener installed. We all have the code, so if you try to attack or break something, we can just think it and you'll be down. So... you're not going to start a fight, right?"

He wasn't sure he could even stand up, let alone throw a punch. He worked his fingers through the suds on the tile, feeling just how wildly unsteady he was, and said, "yeah, fine."

The minibots instantly returned to his side, and that was that.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Skyfire gets to move in with the trine.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The aerials go flying and Skyfire has a conversation with the Prime.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Alright! Ready?"

Fireflight practically vibrated in mid-air. "Ready!"

Slingshot, hovering in his rootmode, squinted through the darkness at the light smudge of his brother's figure. "Why did we let Fireflight test this, again?"

Silverbolt hovered a few feet below him, frozen in place. "I don't know."

"GO!"

Fireflight transformed into a skinny pale blur as he shot straight for the perimeter fence, hysterical exhilaration lighting up the gestalt bonds as he spurred himself towards even greater speeds. Then he passed over the small fence below and Silverbolt felt his shock as his body fell into stasis and into a nosedive. His brother shrieked and terror raced across the bond - and then Skyfire was catching him, slowing his descent until the shuttle could safely lower him to the ground.

They were already flying to meet them, Powerglide close behind and Perceptor waiting below. As they landed they heard Fireflight giggling, already in rootmode and sprawling in Skyfire's arms.

"That... was... awesome. Silverbot, you have got to test out one of the other sides of the fence."

"No, I think I'm good."

"Technically the fence is circular and doesn't have sides, but never mind that! Did you see the warning light when you were close to the perimeter?" Perceptor was practically bouncing with excitement even as he checked the little ankle monitor.

"A warning popped up on my HUD and the ankle thing lit up."

"Excellent!"

They ran through the fence a few more times each, letting the aerials get their flying hours in while Perceptor made notes on timing. Skyfire gently badgered them into letting him plug into their wrist ports after each fall, checking over their systems for any changes in their programming. Despite his worries, no issues appeared, and he watched in mild interest with his fellow scientist as the newbuilds took turns catching Powerglide.

"The monitor works," he observed, more for something to say than anything else.

Perceptor beamed. "I have to say I got a bit of a scare when you told me about the glitches associated
with flight sickness, but I think this fence is the best idea we could have had. I've also made the monitors tamper proof, they will send a bot into stasis the moment someone tries to break into or short circuit them. Even if someone manages to rip it off, they won't do it before it can take them down. Now that I think about it, I'll have to make sure there are backups available if that does happen...”

Skyfire placed his considerably bigger palm on the scientist's shoulder. Past experience had taught him that even a little bit of force could send the poor mech staggering. "Thank you for this, Percy. I doubt they'll ever say it, but you've helped quite a few fliers with this."

"Oh, don't," his friend said, faceplates heating. "Without you I wouldn't have realized the aerials programming is so different from grounders! It's very interesting. I rarely saw them in my younger days..." he trailed off, expression pensive. "Well. Never mind that! Did you want to head back, Skyfire? You seem, forgive me for saying this, very distracted."

"Optimus sent me a message. Our apartment is done."

"Is it? Well go then!" Immediately the mech began pushing at his side, field lighting up with excitement. "I know you said you've been anxious to get all your personal affects into your room before the move. Cybertron knows we'll be stuck with very little entertainment for quite a while."

Well, his personal affects and the ones he still has in his subspace that belonged to Starscream. Laughing a little, he let himself be pushed a single step aside. "Are you sure? You don't need my help with anything?"

He flapped his hand at him, snorting. "Please! I'm sure Powerglide can help with the actual flying part well enough. We can talk about the results later."

He waved goodbye to the aerials, and Powerglide as well before taking off. The last he saw before turning away was the kids, circling around each other and trying to catch a streaking Powerglide around the fence. Excitement pulsed through his spark, and in a moment of optimism, he reached out across the severed bond. There was no response, of course, but he refused to let it bring his mood down. Very, very soon he would have Starscream with him again, and yes it seemed his dear seeker hated him to a great extent, and no he didn't trust him, but it was so clear to him that Starscream was damaged. He had never been this unstable, this mercurial and paranoid and contradicting. He set aside the thoughts of how long they had been separated, of the millions of stellar cycles that had passed while he slumbered in the Arctic and Starscream was left in forced stasis in the Ark and instead focused on what he imagined his time with the Decepticons had been like. He would fix this, somehow. He had promised to. And even if he didn't, at least he would see to it that Starscream and his trine were safe and well-cared for.

Skyfire shook the darker thoughts off as he landed in center of the space bridge, leaning in to the unusual sensation of being moved through space under a power not his own. From there it was barely any time until he was back at the base, passing the twins out on patrol, waving to Jazz relaxing in the recreation room. Instead of going to the Prime's office, he turned right and made his way to the medbay instead. It was crammed full of fliers, all in stasis and completely unconscious. He maneuvered around the still forms entangled with netting, each attached to a scanner (or the approximation of a scanner). Starscream looked just the same as when he left him on the slab, his trine mates equally still. Skywarp, the only flier without a net, had one small weld along his side. Skyfire knew this was where Ratchet had performed a very minor but very important surgery on him, disabling his teleportation matrix and placing a small blocker within it to keep it from rebooting itself. He knew the medic had felt uneasy about it, and perhaps that was why the weld was so neatly sanded down, barely visible at all. He thought it might even heal completely before the purple seeker woke up.
Removing the stasis chip would be easier, Ratchet claimed. Instead of cutting into his frame, all he had to do was remove a bit of plating, slide some cables aside, and dislodge a single circuit board deep in the seeker's back and detach the chip. He would have the bot back together in ten minutes tops, and a good chunk of that would be dedicated to making sure there were no foreign deposits or debris that had worked it's way in there. From there Skyfire would make sure he was unconscious during transport, and once the doors were closed...

Well. He imagined he would have three very unhappy seekers on hand.

He idly checked the scanner's status reports on Starscream, and it was then he felt the quiet regard of someone behind him. "Sorry I didn't come by right away," he said, optics locked on the seeker's fuel level. Eighty-nine percent full, of course. All of the sleeping seekers fuel levels hovered in the middle of a healthy bar, at seventy-nine percent or higher.

"It's no problem, Skyfire. We have more than enough time to talk."

He hummed an acknowledgement but didn't turn towards the Prime. He wasn't sure how he felt about him, truthfully, but that extended far beyond the character of the Prime right into the heart of the war. A war that he had missed, almost entirely. He felt grateful Optimus had chosen the less bloody path, partly from a distaste of violence and partly because he didn't have to try and spirit Starscream away from such a dark fate.

Skyfire wondered if he was being unfair in his reservations about Optimus. It couldn't be easy to be a leader in the middle of the war, to go again and again into battle, knowing you and your soldiers might not make it back in one piece - or at all. But Skyfire was from a time when such pain was unthinkable. Yes, he remembered the way Starscream had been treated at the Academy, and how hard his friend had worked to put all the other students to shame and barely been recognized for it, but it was a far jump from prejudice to their planet going dark and mechs fighting and killing each other in the streets.

At least, he thought it was. Maybe he was wrong about that.

His spark ached, halved and needy. He gave in to the flicker of loneliness and raised a hand to ghost it across dark faceplates, following the curve of a cheek, meeting the hard protective helm. Starscream looked so calm and serene, but he knew it wasn't real. Once the seeker woke up...

Skyfire dropped his hand and turned. "Your message said the apartment is done. Does that mean I can move in with the trine?"

"If you want to, then yes. We moved the seekers up in priority, so they should all be getting into their apartments soon and we can focus on the others, and since we have Powerglide and Cosmos and the aerialbots, I thought it wouldn't hurt anything if you wanted to go."

Skyfire nodded. He couldn't think of anything to say, not to Optimus. Around the others, the scientists and the aerials and even the twins and minibots, he thought he did well enough. No one seemed to have any open reservations about him after a few weeks, and after a month had gone by it was like he had been with them forever. But around the Prime his words dried up.

Optimus looked from him to the sleeping seekers. "Are they alright like this?"

"Yes. Since they can't go flying yet, it's better than letting them stay awake. Once everything is settled in I would like to borrow the aerials for a flight, after I've explained everything."

Again, silence. But the other mech was still staring at the trine, at Starscream in particular, and he
could not quite pin down the expression on his face. After a moment Optimus said, "thank you for agreeing to live with them. I thought you might, but I wanted to be sure. Starscream... the seekers in general have caused a lot of trouble for the Autobots, but the head trine has always been a sore spot for many of my soldiers. He is very," he cut himself off then, trying to choose his words with more care. "He is not above emotional manipulation. Red Alert in particular had a difficult time with him. But since you two used to be friends, I thought it would be best if he could live with someone he was familiar with." He finally looked at Skyfire. "Even if it's not easy."

"I would have wanted to live with him and his trine even if there was someone else you thought more suitable. It is what bonded do, after all."

The Prime didn't react, at first, almost as if he hadn't heard the shuttle - and then he stiffened. "You two were..."

He smiled. "Don't tell anyone. I think it will give them ideas. But yes. The bond was severed some time after I crashed here on Earth."

He thought a bit of disclosure would go a ways towards something closer with Optimus. A little more understanding, perhaps? He would likely not see him for a long time, and he wondered if his recalcitrance towards the leader had cost him what might have turned into a friendship of sorts. But more than anything the new information seemed to have upset him. "I'm so sorry, Skyfire."

He shrugged. "I am too. Sometimes - " he stopped. He sometimes wished Starscream had crashed there with him, waiting in the ice until they were uncovered by the Decepticons. He thought Starscream, then, would not have wanted to stay with them, and if the course of history had been the same they could have left for the Autobots. Wheeljack and Perceptor were nice enough. His seeker would have gotten along with them. But a fantasy like that had no place being voiced in reality. "Well. I think it will be alright. I hope so, at least."

He was starting to wish he had not told Optimus at all, because the Prime looked very upset. He seemed to grapple back control and asked, "did anyone ever tell you how the war started?"

"They... didn't. I suppose I never asked."

"It was me. I was the first shot, the first casualty. And then my friends..." He clenched his fists, not in anger but as if to steel himself. "Megatron came to the docks, where I used to work. There had not been a lot of information about the Decepticons, at the time. I thought they were - I thought he was - admirable. Someone to be respected. But when we met, and I showed him the warhouses, I soon realized the mistake I had made." He looked around the medbay, at all the peaceful sleeping seekers. "I don't think there was much I could have done. He wanted what was being stored at the docks and would have taken it regardless of my actions. But everything that came after, the war, the planet going dark, the mass evacuations and bombings and casualties. It all came after me. And I wish they hadn't, but that was not something anyone could control."

What did he say to that? What could he say? Skyfire thought Optimus had been in some sort of position of authority, a higher government position and he became Prime after the war had already started. "How did you survive the attack?"

"I was lucky. I had met a group of very young, very brave aerials earlier that cycle. They took us to the only bot who could have helped, and he rebuilt me into the mech I am now." A quiet laugh followed. "I don't think Megatron even knows." And then, just as suddenly as before, he changed the subject. "Did you know Thundercracker or Skywarp?"

"No. Starscream didn't know them when we were in the Academy, he would have mentioned them."
"I guess you'll have to get to know them too. If you need anything, even more movies or blankets or waxes, contact us. We'll send someone. I have to go - I promised Hoist and Grapple I would assist with moving the Constructicons. It seems you're not alone in getting a new apartment, Skyfire."

He wondered if the other Autobots were as pleased as he was about how quickly everything was progressing, but more than that he wished he could spare more of his compassion for them. He knew that certain Autobots were more than nervous, not that they would admit it, but he found himself unable to be anything other than hopeful. He did wonder if later Optimus would try going back to the cells to try and talk the other Cons around again, but there was little he could do to help. He had packing to get to, after all, and wanted to say one last goodbye to Perceptor and Wheeljack. "Good luck, Optimus."

"And you, too. Maybe you won't need it as much as me?"

He doubted it, but it was a nice thought anyway.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who wanted to see more Skyfire/trine interaction, don't worry, it's in the next chapter. Any feedback is appreciated! See you in two weeks.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The seekers are not loving their new living arrangements.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"We can't stay in here forever, you know."

Starscream glared at his trine mate from where he was hunched down in the corner of the washracks. "What've you got to bet on that?"

"Starscream!" Skyfire knocked on the locked door, patient and only a bit exasperated. Thundercracker thought that was a bad attitude to take - it had only been a few joors yet, and their leader could easily stay mad for days. "You have to refuel some time."

"NO, WE DON'T!"

"I would like to fuel at some point."

"Shove it, Warp."

The purple seeker groaned and slumped back against the counter, left wing scraping over the mirror. "Come on. I know you're mad, but if we starve -"

"Shhhh! Enough."

The washracks area was pretty big. Thundercracker supposed that came with living with a shuttle; everything, from the height of the doors to the size of the mesh cushions on the couch were bigger than they were used to. Not that they were used to nice mesh cushions, exactly. They could probably fit all three of themselves into the actual washracks, but their trine leader had resolutely stomped over to it and flung himself into the corner once the door had been locked, and he didn't look ready for company. Thundercracker was still surprised the shuttle had let them get up and move around.

"Star," Skyfire said, sounding unbearably tired. "You're going to get bored in there. And hungry. Just come out now so we can skip all that."

"I don't want to talk to you."

Thundercracker traded glances with Skywarp, who was idly swinging his leg off the edge. He flashed his optics back, grimacing at their trine mate's sulky tone, before turning his attention to the mirror. Skyfire was right; eventually, Starscream would get bored. Horribly, terribly bored, and that would lead to restless anger and no doubt he would start going through cupboards in search of dangerous chemicals or possible weapons. If Skyfire was half as smart as his fancy education promised, there wouldn't be any.

Starscream was welcome to waste all the time he liked, but the problem was that his trine mates were stuck with him. It was different on the Nemesis, where they could blow each other off and make
deals with the other Decepticons. Their trine had long since passed its healthy, carefree days, and they hadn't needed to follow their air commander into every single disaster he created for a long time now.

But there were no Decepticons here. Just a shuttle who decided when they got to eat and plenty of locked doors they couldn't get through. Starscream was the only lead they had and if he locked himself in the washracks, well, what were they supposed to do but follow him?

Something pinged off the side of his helm, and Thundercracker turned to see Skywarp, innocently inspecting his reflection and pretending he hadn't just thrown a little bottle of solvent at his trine mate's head.

A sigh came from the door. "I'll give you some space, okay? Call if you need anything."

Starscream didn't reply, ignoring the sound of heavy pedes as the shuttleformer walked away. He scowled at the tile wall, resolute in his anger.

Thundercracker huffed and got up from his seat on the floor. It all came down to him, it seemed, but that was one's lot in life when they were the oldest of the trine. He moved across the small space so he could look down at the curled up lump of stubborn seeker. "You need to get up."

"You need to shut your slagging mouth before I - "

Whatever Starscream was going to do was lost as Thundercracker turned the cold water on full blast. Starscream screeched, flailing in the washracks as freezing water flooded through his armor, and then the door flew off its hinges with a great crash as Skyfire came barreling in. Thundercracker shot into the farthest corner away from him, more shocked than scared, but that was rapidly changing.

"Starscream - " he stopped. The mech in question had reached up and slapped the lever into the off position, still on the ground, cold and wet and even angrier than before.

"I am going to KILL YOU!" He shouted, flaring his field at Thundercracker. Then a towel was thrown on him and he was scooped up off the floor. "No! Not you! Get off, you traitorous, ungrateful - " his insults devolved into intelligible shrieks as the shuttle carried him out of the room, struggling wildly between the towel and grip, and only faded off when they heard a door shut.

Thundercracker looked over at Skywarp to find him still on the counter, but he had pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around them. "Maybe that wasn't the best choice I could have made."

"You think? Starscream's the only one he likes!" He quieted when the other seeker came over and shushed him, flaring his plating and filing the purple seeker's field of vision. Skywarp squirmed towards him and pushed against his chassis. "Now what?"

"Now we get out of this room before the shuttle comes back and makes us fix the door."

They removed themselves post-haste. Both were aware that Skyfire's size wasn't just for show - even mechs who hadn't been present knew of the time the shuttle had hoisted Megatron over his head and thrown him across an entire field. Pacifist who really needed to be pushed to anger or not, they didn't want to be the ones doing the pushing. Starscream was good enough at that on his own.

Skyfire supposed he had brought this on himself. He had hardly expected anything else when Starscream woke up and ran for the nearest open door, but standing outside the washracks and trying to coax the angry mech into at least unlocking it was not his idea of a good first half-joor together.
He could break down the door, since it was one of the few not created with a stronger lock - they couldn't have Cons barricading themselves in rooms and starving themselves - but he really wanted Starscream to open the door himself.

Then he heard screaming and all thoughts of patience had flown right out of his helm. Images of the three bots fighting flashed in his mind and were instantly discarded once he saw them in different corners of the room. It was obvious what had happened, but he took advantage of it and wrangled Starscream into his arms.

Naturally, he was not pleased.

"I'll claw your fragging optics out! I'll take your wings off if you don't GET OFF me NOW!" Fingers scratched awkwardly at his arm and dug into his hand. He winced at the volume and the twinges of pain but his thicker plating held. From behind he could detect no movement, no sounds to indicate the rest of the trine was following their leader. Not a good sign, but it was useful for the moment. Skyfire bundled the flailing seeker up against his chassis, sure to keep his arms locked tight around the towel that slowed his movements.

"Starscream - "

"SHUT UP!"

With a grimace he turned in to one of the three small berthrooms. He caught sight of the way he had just walked down - still no seekers following them - and pushed the door shut with his pede.

"If you think I am ever going to trust you again, after what you did - in front of Megatron no less - and after I vouched for you! I - " His voice cut off with a startled shout when Skyfire dropped him on the berth. He had barely taken a step back when the white mech hurled himself off the berth, towel falling aside as two blue hands came barreling toward his optics. Without a single astrosecond of hesitation Skyfire triggered the frequency that would send his ex-bonded into near-stasis lock, catching him before he could crash to the floor. He made a small, strangled sound. His optics were round with shock when Skyfire adjusted him, slipping an arm under his legs to pull him into a better carrying position.

"It's okay," he promised quietly, laying the stiff seeker flat on the berth. He pulled the towel out from under him and briskly wiped away the last of the water. "You're safe here. It's just a power dampener. You know I mean it when I say I'll do something, don't you? If you try to attack me, or your trine mates, or try to hurt yourself I'll use the frequency. It's not going to be a punishment and no one's going to hit you here. You can refuel whenever you want and I won't withhold energon from anyone. But there will not be any fighting, understand?" He watched the fingers flex and curl slowly into a fist, but other than that Starscream didn't react.

Skyfire knew he couldn't respond now, but once he regained control of himself Starscream would probably have more than a few things to say. He already wasn't looking forward to it and busied himself with freeing and then tucking the top blanket around the smaller aerial.

He closed the door behind him as quietly as he could, glancing down the empty hallway. Space really would do Starscream some good, but he had two other bots to keep an optic on... and a door to fix.

He thought Thundercracker and Skywarp were still in the washracks, but the two mechs were instead hovering in the kitchen area. The living room had couches with low backs, a TV to watch movies and a low, oval table in the middle. An entryway was kept from being one giant open space by the counter that divided the two areas. It was probably the nicest apartment he had ever lived in,
and he was certain it was the best the seekers had ever had.

"We didn't touch anything!"

Apparently his silence had unsettled them, or at least Skywarp. "You can refuel, if you want. The dispenser in there works. I don't think there's anything in the storage unit yet, though."

A pause, and then in the exact same tone as before, "okay!"

Skyfire rolled his optics and resolutely made his way to the kitchen. He would invariably have to get to know his - to know Starscream's trine. He didn't see much point in putting it off or drawing it out, and if he were perfectly honest with himself, he was extremely curious. Starscream had always had a bit of a temper, a low capacity for other's "nonsense" (which ranged from getting allegedly obvious questions wrong to actual insults) and a very obvious expectation of the negative. Skyfire expected he had been different when he first onlined, but by the time they met, he didn't expect much from anyone.

He was curious about how similar the other two seekers might be. "Skywarp, Thundercracker?" He peered around the counter to see them both scrunched into the corner of the kitchen. "Are you two alright? That was quite a bit of commotion earlier."

"We're fine," Thundercracker replied, wings tensing slightly.

He saw how the seeker stayed squarely between him and his trine mate and wondered at what they thought he might do. Unbeknownst to him, he had earned a bit of a mixed reputation - strong enough to throw Megatron across a field, but his apparent pacifism was labeled as a near logical failing. What was the point of a mech that strong and capable if they didn't throw their weight around?

"Uh... is the conversation over, or - oof!" Skywarp jerked in surprise at the elbow to stomach maneuver.

Skyfire blinked. "We didn't talk much when I was with the Decepticons, did we?"

"Not much, no," Thundercracker replied, a shade of unfriendliness coloring his face.

"Well, I hope we can talk more in the future, since we're going to be living together for a while." He sounded cautious, but not hopeless. It rankled something deep in Thundercracker's programming, an atavistic twinge of coding. He was trying to worm his way in, into their trine and into Thundercracker and Skywarp and stupid fragging Starscream, and the seeker didn't have a home to guard but he still had them.

So he said, "I don't think we'll have much to talk about," rather sharply, despite the flicker of dread in his gut.

Skyfire shrugged, unmoved. "I'm sure we can find something."

"A-hem," Skywarp half-coughed. "Can I... am I only one who just... doesn't want to do this? Shuttle, just say whatever it is you want to say."

There wasn't much he did want to say at that moment, but Skyfire appreciated that the purple mech was obviously feeling jumpy. He gave them a quick run down of the rules and expectations, feeling vaguely like a senior doing a tour for the newest batch of academe attendees. Skywarp was now blatantly staring at the energon dispenser. "In a few days a perimeter fence should be finished and you can go flying for a bit. The aerialbots have wanted to meet you formally for a while now, you know."
Skywarp perked up at that, looking over at him. "The aerialbots can come see us?"

"They are going to be living with another trine, so they can't really leave them alone - "

"Wait, what trine?"

"I'm not sure I remember."

Skywarp frowned. "It wasn't the Coneheads, was it?"

"No, they're going to be living with Sideswipe and Sunstreaker - "

Skywarp's mouth dropped open in horror. "What?"

Thundercracker stepped back between them. "What trine?"

"I think it was something... about the storm makers? Was that it?"

"The Rainmakers!"

"Yes, that sounds right." He smiled. "They were really excited. I know they thought Optimus might not want them to live with any Decepticons, but he knows they want to spend some time with other fliers."

"I'm surprised the Prime is allowing them to have contact with us." Feeling a bit more in control with the information, even if it was currently useless, Thundercracker plunged on with, "so are we not allowed to see Starscream right now?"

Skyfire looked at him in surprise. "You can go see him whenever you want. He was very upset when I left him in his room, so... something to keep in mind."

"Right. Do we have to talk to you?"

Skyfire wasn't sure if he was trying to pick a fight, or just didn't have the energy left to figure out how to be more polite. "You don't, actually. You don't have to talk to me, spend time with me, or even be in the same room with me. But if you stop fueling or hurt yourselves or each other, I will call Ratchet in."

Mentioning Ratchet always had a very strange effect on the Decepticons. They seemed to view him as an exceedingly useful and talented mech they did not want anywhere near them. Skyfire was not aware of where this particular reputation had come from - Ratchet was not notably violent and the missions he went out on were few and far between - and no one had ever mentioned any particular infamous incident that might have lead to it. He half wondered if it was because of his profession more than any action he had ever taken.

He watched in mild scientific interest as the two seekers exchanged a worried glance, as if he had threatened to take their wings off rather than call a doctor.

Thundercracker nodded. "Come on, Warp."

"Wait," Skywarp finally spoke, darting over to the energon dispenser and filling up a few cubes. Skyfire took a few quiet steps back and when neither noticed he relocated to the couch. He chose a movie at random and lowered the volume, audio receptors tuned to the soft rustling and clinking of cubes as two seekers looped around behind him to get to the hallway. They didn't look back or speak before they disappeared into one of the two remaining berth rooms, closing the door noiselessly.
Starscream's room was equally silent and it stayed that way, all throughout the three hour film. He shut it off once the credits began and stood listening, for anything, before he let himself grab a cube and retire.

Moonracer rearranged the pile of cubes on the tray, idly lining them up according to health benefit. Medical grade energon, a hefty dose of mid grade and finally a tiny sweetened mix. Niceties never hurt, after all. "You know, I sort of expected Shockwave to put up more of a fight. Even without his gun - "

Greenlight interrupted with, "maybe it's because we're going to let him talk with the seekers."

"Do you think he, you know, worries about them?"

"He did lead them for millions of vorns."

"I think he worries," Moonracer insisted. "I don't believe that stuff about him not having feelings. It was probably propaganda anyway."

"Well, he was loyal. Can't have loyalty without emotions."

Lancer crossed the room and dropped her most recent attempt at sculpting onto the table. Another communal bowl, it looked like. "You can be loyal without feeling a connection if that's the best way to survive. Why are we debating Shockwave's emotions?"

"Moonracer thinks he's worried about the seekers and that's why he's playing nice."

"Maybe he's planning something. Elita was just saying it seemed quiet - "

A great THWOOM rattled the table, and Lancer clutched at her bowl in shock. "What was that?"

"I think you know what it was. Hurry up!"

The three Autobots tore through the mid-sized apartment, scrambling over furniture that seemed much more troublesome than before. They all crashed through Shockwave's door to find him crouching on the other side of his berth, glaring intently at the lightly blackened wall opposite him. The crystal encasing the portable light was gone, the metal lamp laying on its side by the wall, and a pile of shattered cubes were on the floor.

Greenlight slapped a hand over her mouth. "You tried to blow up the wall? You've been hoarding energon? To blow up a wall?"

"What is this wall made of? Is this durabyllium?" Annoyance at having failed turned to astonishment. "Where did you get so much of it?"

Lancer sighed, rolled her optics, and moved to check him over. "What are your energon levels at?"

"We might have tore down most of the government buildings and reused them to make apartments for the Bot-Con groups." Moonracer circled around the room, looking amazed. "I can't believe you built a bomb out of practically nothing."

"A dismal attempt, to be sure. Twenty-six percent," he added, pulling his arm away when Lancer tried to access his diagnostic port.

"Well, now you can deal with being monitored for your meals."
Moonracer gasped, loudly. "Do you know what this means?"

Greenlight toed the broken bits of crystal. "Elita's going to flip her lid?"

"Shockwave has to eat with us now!"

This jubilant declaration was met with scowls from all three occupants.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing will deter Moonracer. She is indomitable. Any guesses about what the next chapter will be? (Here is the tumblr link for anyone who wants it http://copperzealot.tumblr.com/post/180738552004/open-spaces-ca-transformers-all-media-types).
Two mechs and their cassettes walk into a bar...

When they finally moved, his cassettes just had to bring everything with them.

Not that Blaster was terribly surprised - they had amassed quite a collection of gifts from various humans, equipment for hobbies and movies upon movies. Ramhorn liked cartoons. Rewind liked to copy human stories onto datapads. Steeljaw liked to collect the many scented oils made from organic materials.

And Eject - he needed every bit of sports equipment he could cram into his subspace. Mostly he could only carry different balls and a few nets, but he did his best, turning a hockey stick this way and that to see if it could possibly fit in at an angle...

Subspace didn't work that way, and he tossed the stick down with a beleaguered sigh. "Aw, whatever. We won't have room for hockey anyway."

The small room they had been crammed into for several years was now as empty as it was going to get. "Come on, sprites. We got Cons to babysit."

"Do you think Rumble remembers that time we tripped him?" Rewind asked, half-worried.

"I hope so. That was hilarious."

"Guys..."

"Quick, Steeljaw!" Eject had collapsed onto the side of his younger sibling, throwing both arms over the side to hang off him. "We have to make fun of the other cassettes before it's too late!"

"Just be good, alright? I don't want to have to go breaking up fights on our first day." When the twins snapped their heels together and saluted in unison, he laughed. "I mean it. I'm not gonna let them wail on you, but - "

"Like we couldn't take them down!"

He patted Eject's head. "I know, but still."

They promised, just as he knew they would. He was hoping the bigger quarters would distract them a bit from their new roommates. Optimus had promised Soundwave and the others would already be in stasis in their room, and when he selected Room B from the menu on the tiny datapad by the door, he saw it was true. One fully upgraded Con (Soundwave) and a smattering of smaller sparks (his cassettes) were accounted for. They slipped into the apartment with little fanfare, and his horde immediately flew in different directions, onto the couch and chairs and into the kitchen.
"Hey!" He hissed, racing to snatch them up. Eject ducked his hand and barrel rolled under the table. "For crying out loud, c'mere."

"It said they were in their room asleep! Let us look around for a sec."

Ramhorn wriggled out of his grasp and Blaster gave up with a sigh. For all he knew the other mech's cassettes might try to create a turf war over the apartment. He at least managed to herd them in the general direction of their larger room to drop off their belongings before they set to mapping out every nook and cranny (not many) and exploring the smaller, personal rooms. Blaster hadn't seen the inside of private washracks in a while, let alone a kitchen (Wheeljack's weird fuel experimentation station with repurposed chemistry equipment didn't count).

"Keep it down," he insistes, and they do. Blaster promptly dumped most of his subspace onto his berth, checks the kitchen over for fuel, and finally takes a seat. As they flood through the apartment, he keeps his attention on the one door they avoid, waiting for it to open.

Everyone already knew they were being "moved" into the new complexes they would have to share with an Autobot. The Autobots did not hide it; they simply handed out the fuel, waited for it to be consumed, and left. Once the Decepticons had passed out - usually within two breems - they filtered back in and removed them. If they only needed to get into one cell, the Decepticons had the privilege of watching their fellow soldiers be carried off. Otherwise, the remaining Decepticons would awaken hours later and find their numbers had depleted once again.

Privately, Soundwave had been hoping the Stunticons would be taken early on. Paranoia was a terrible thing for well-adjusted bots in their adult frames; glitch-ridden mechs who had barely been online for two years fared far worse.

Days went by without anyone disappearing. Cons who had refused fuel gave in, eventually. It was clean fuel, pleasantly cool and far above their own rations. In fact, he would bet it was better than what the Autobots had been living off of until recently.

When the Autobots came down to give them their fuel for the morning, he knew someone would disappear. He had been betting that higher ranking officers would be moved last, and it made him worry less. But as he fueled, that small kernel of worry grew until he had to set the cube down, a third full. His fellow soldiers kept up their usual chatter as the drug set in and he realized he had made a mistake. It had been thirteen days - or the human version of days - since the last move and they were hungry.

Soundwave had laid down on his back and laced his fingers over his abdomen, studying the smooth ceiling as his vitals pinged him with updates. Everything was shutting down, slowing down. He tried to speculate on where they would be moved to, who the Autobot Prime would have paired them with. He had tried to speak to them all, bizarrely, to figure out where they would want to go. It had gone as well as could be expected. But he knew the Prime had some idea of who would go where, and he tried to distract himself as his systems powered down, as his creations went quiet and calm in sleep.

Before he even woke up, Soundwave knew it was all over.

With a swell of tumultuous emotions, he called out to his cassettes - and they all answered, and he was aware of their weight in his chest, all five of them snug against each other. They were safe.

But was Soundwave?
The Decepticons were furious that the Autobots were stealing their numbers away, allegedly to their new "homes", although only one mech - First Aid - had had to gal to call the apartments that in front of them. Soundwave, although he had not outwardly reacted, had been slowly being overwhelmed by dread for the last three weeks. He didn't want to live with them, and there were a few in particular he wanted to avoid at all costs - Jazz, Ironhide, Prime, the twins for starters - but he had failed to imagine how to avoid such a fate. His cassettes had been unhappy little burning stings against his spark, frightened and furious about being frightened. He had been dreading the day he would fall into recharge in the cell only to wake up somewhere else, with his creations missing and someone else standing over him.

At that thought, he looked around the small room he was in, and found it empty. His mind made a valiant attempt to calm itself. He was on a berth, unrestrained, and his cassettes were still with him. They were alone.

But, he knew, not for long.

*I'm not coming out!* Frenzy suddenly burst out, and he felt the cassette inside his chest settle down deeper.

Stay, he agreed, sending it along the sparkbond to them all. Lazerbeak, Buzzsaw, Ravage, and Rumble gave their assent, and he sat up to properly see their environment.

The room had no windows and two doors. He expected one might be a closet or a small washrack, and the other the way to the main room. Their Autobot keeper was no doubt hiding somewhere, as Soundwave doubted any of them would be foolish enough to leave their captives alone on the first day, but Autobot intelligence had surprised him before. When he cracked the door on the left, it revealed a small but comfortable looking washracks with a sink and mirror. No window, but upon opening the cupboard under the sink, he found a sizable collection of plain waxes, soaps and cleaning cloths.

He found the final door - the one that lead out of his new personal quarters - unlocked and ventured forth.

Soundwave saw into the living room and part of the kitchen, and when he spotted a red-orange helm with sensor horns peaking over the back of the couch, he felt his anxiety settle.

Blaster was not the worst choice, by far. He was the same rare frametype as Soundwave, able to create a symbiotic bond with the mini-cassettes they singularly created. Like his Decepticon ward, Blaster's spark had distorted, rings of excess energy standing out in static arcs, until a bud of newspark energy broke off and formed itself. It then drew micrometals from his frame, building a tight shell around itself where it could then safely draw more micrometals and energy and slowly build itself its miniature frame. When the body was strong enough it would attach to the dock, emergence would occur, and his inner chamber behind his docking bay would disengage clasps and locks to reveal his spark and the pod within.

Blaster was someone intensely interesting to Soundwave, because he was the only other living documented Cybertronian who shared his frametype. So, yes, he did calm down once he recognized who he would be living with.

Blaster looked over the back of the couch and said, "there you are."

"You requested to room with us?"

"Optimus thought it was a good idea."
Soundwave supposed he agreed with the Prime, so he circled around the couch and settled into a thickly padded chair. None of the furniture matched even a little bit, and he guessed the Autobots must have scrounged it all from other buildings. They might have clung to the old order of things, but even they wouldn't hesitate to ransack the abandoned suites and high-rise apartments that once housed the richer side of Cybertron.

"The sparks are still sleeping, then?"

"Yes."

Soundwave wondered what kind of information he would be allowed. Blaster was a very energetic and social individual, but being a communications officer he knew the value of information. "Query: future location of Megatron?"

"He's going to be with Prime."

"I see." His thoughts were immediately filled with visions of the two fighting, of Megatron being restrained and left alone for joors on end. The Prime would not suffer even the possibility of the leader of the Decepticons escaping, and he doubted there were any restrictions on the Prime. Would his leader be fueled properly? Was he okay? Would Soundwave ever see or speak to him again? He squashed all anxiety from his field, focusing it inward as best he could, but could not redirect his thoughts no matter how hard he tried.

Whether his silence was suspect, or Blaster simply felt chatty, the Autobot continued with, "so I figure now is as good a time as any to go over the rules with you."

Soundwave lifted his helm, frowning behind his mask. "Rules?"

"Rule number uno: no fighting. You try and jump me, or my cassettes, or any of your little guys try anything and all I gotta do is this."

Weight without mass pushed down on him, his mechanisms and algorithms for balance fell apart and Soundwave swayed on the couch, tipping sideways onto the cushions. Instantly the foreign feeling was gone, his system returning rapidly to it's baseline, and he skimmed through the quickly disappearing error reports to see no damage had been done to him. He pushed himself back up with more effort than he would admit and fixed a glare at the Autobot.

"Sorry 'bout that, but I wanted you to know it's painless. I won't do it again unless I have to. That no fighting thing goes both ways, too. I'm not gonna hit you or anything like that." Blaster glanced over his shoulder, to a closed door. "I made sure my own little horde knows the rules too, so if they try to start something, tell me and I'll make 'em stop. What else... we're not on rations. Energon's on tap all day every day. I guess you can try and call the other Cons to talk with 'em, if you want, but it's gonna be monitored by Red Alert. And of course, you can't leave."

"Questions: acceptable?"

"Sure."

"What is the Autobot's goal?"

"Honestly? I'm not one hundred percent on what it's supposed to look like, but I'll shoot straight with you; you and yours abandon the Decepticon way of life and you get out of here. And so do I, for that matter. No stealing energy sources. No more conquering, no more wars. No kidnapping or killing other lifeforms - especially not humans. We all live on our cold little planet and build up our lives and Optimus gets to be happy."
Soundwave surveyed the mech across from him for any smirk or sign that he was joking. "Autobots: have shown they do not care for warframes, flightframes. Decepticons: will not be pets or slaves."

"Autobots: don't want Decepticons as pets or slaves." At the resulting glare, Blaster shrugged. "It's true. Optimus wants us all to forgive each other and move on. That's the goal. You asked, I answered." His gaze skittered down from the blue and white face to the glass of his chestplates. "Besides, we share the same frametype. Two of a kind and all that. And the fliers have had a few bumps here and there, but they're living with us just fine."

"Soundwave: loyal."

The red bot sighed. "Yeah, I figured. Damn, this conversation isn't really heading the way I thought it would." He hopped to his pedes and if Soundwave jumped a little, he didn't mention it. "If you have any questions, ask, but here're the basics; no fighting, you can fuel however much you want whenever you want, there's washracks in your room and a tv out here. You should have some datapads in your room, even. You can let the bitlets out but I won't be upset if you don't. Expect the kids to be around. I'm going down for a nap." With that, the red mech left his enemy alone, sitting on the living room couch and with no idea of what to do.

Chapter End Notes

Completely off topic, sometimes a family is two dads and nine children. ID Updated a little later than usual, but I made it! See you all in two weeks.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Moving days were simultaneously alarming and fun. On one hand, not a single Decepticon had gotten loose during the transfers. On the other hand, the Autobots had enough experience to know that things usually went well - until they suddenly didn't.

"What is that?"

They all turned to see Slingshot staring at something on the ground. Strangely, there appeared to be a small purple camera on the cell floor -

Silence stole over the Autobots. Optimus froze before darting a look over to Prowl. They had somehow, impossibly, forgotten about the Reflector unit entirely.

Prowl looked just as stunned as he felt, and then a minor miracle happened; someone raised their hand.

"I'll take 'em!" Bumblebee said, looking curiously at the silent camera. "They're not very dangerous at all, right? We can get a room in the same building with my friends and I can stay alone with them."

Optimus scanned the faces of the other minibots, but while they looked a little surprised, none of them were upset. "If that is what you would like, I don't see a problem with it. Thank you, Bumblebee."

There was a pause, and then the scout crouched down before his newly appointed roommates. "Ready?"

The camera unit failed to flash, click, speak or otherwise communicate. Bumblebee reached out cautiously, gripped the top of the unit, and lifted them off the floor. The camera remained as still as a corpse, but he could feel the electromagnetic field buzzing against his own, held tightly to the metal. It was funny. Only one field, but now he was responsibly for three other entire Cybertronians.

He almost wanted to ask if one of the others would like to room with them, but knew the Reflector unit was one of the rare Decepticons that didn't fight much. Their strengths laid with their stealth and reconnaissance capabilities. Camera secured against his chest with both hands, Bumblebee stood up and carried them out of the cell. "Now that I think about it, is there going to be another room?"

Optimus looked to Prowl, who frowned. "No. But there is a second space in a different building. Optimus - "

"Yes," he said.

"But what about - " and then Prowl's mouth snapped shut.

"What about what?" Gears asked, suspicious.

But their leader waved it away. "It was going to be for something else, but I'd rather it go to Bumblebee and Reflector. They'll need a proper apartment, not some storage closet, and the upper areas are almost all identical. We'll just switch."
We. Gears put it together in a flash; Optimus and Megatron were supposed to live in that apartment and why else would there be a second, smaller apartment but for someone to keep close in case of an emergency? If anyone asked him, he would have bet it would be Ironhide, but no one brought it up. They all stepped around the Oilephant in the room, wanting to keep Bumblebee close but reluctant to let Decepticons live together more than they had to.

It went easily after that. Skyfire was no longer available to help carry someone as big as Blitzwing, but Ironhide and Brawn managed the bulk of the work. They played twenty questions, stealing away bits of information about the aerial side of their charge for future reference.

"We never had much triple-changer info before this, and even Skyfire said he's not too sure how that'll affect their sky hunger scrap. But he said to take this one out flying as often as the aerials like to go, until Blitzwing says somethin' different."

"We'll deal with it," Brawn said, as Gears was occupied holding the massive mech's legs up. "We'll see if we can't take him and Astrotrain out flying together and see if Powerglide can help. I don't know if the aerialbots even want to deal with 'em. They're not like the seekers."

"Who knows? Ask the kids. I don't think Powerglide can grab both if they go past the fence and fall."

"You think they'd do that?"

Huffer snorted at Bumblebee's alarmed tone. "It's not like those two are known for their brains."

They chatted quietly the rest of the way, but Bumblebee largely ignored them, focused instead of his own cargo. The Reflector unit had not moved since their capture, not even when Perceptor had administer a spray of something that made them fall into stasis (with repeated promises that there would be no side affects). A part of him was incredibly curious about living with a Decepticon; as a scout he had overheard many a bored conversation or mundane exchange between the Decepticons that they worried him a bit less than his friends. A triple changer that had once constructed a massive maze after overthrowing both Megatron and Starscream was a threat. A triple changer who handed off an extra ration he "found" to his friend while they kept guard was still a threat, but now he was interesting.

He had never met the camera, though. Bumblebee had run into the cassettes many times while trying to scout ahead, but he had never even caught sight of Reflector. Prowl had actually considered the possibility that they had died at some point, but then they had appeared with Skywarp at a water treatment facility a month later, only to disappear once again. That struck him as strange behavior, even for a Decepticon (of which strange behavior knew no bounds).

When they reached the door to his friend's new living quarters, he stood back until they had moved their charge inside before darting in for hugs.

"Yeah, yeah," Huffer said, keeping his complaints to a minimum as Bumblebee squeezed him against his chest. "Maybe things will settle down and one of us can come visit some time."

"Get in here," Gears ordered, throwing one arm out so the yellow bot could duck in for another hug.

Bumblebee was a bit torn - he had wanted to live with at least some of his friends - but after extracting promises for them to come visit in the future, he stepped back and let the door close.

"Don't worry, Bee, ya got the HUBs to talk with each other and ya only live one floor away."

"I know."
He got an awkward pat on the shoulder. "Come on," the red mech said before leading him back down the stairs.

Standing before the door - his door now, really - Bumblebee mulled over the situation one last time. "Hey, Ironhide? Thanks for the room."

The older mech looked surprised, and then shrugged. "Prime said it was fine. Maybe even for the best, I don't think I'm as forgivin' as he is anyway and being near Megatron - " he cut himself off and sighed. "Well, I'll still check up on 'em. And you!" He added suddenly, startling the scout. "Make sure ya check in regularly. You're the only bot on their own with a Con, aside from Optimus himself. I don't care if they're not combat. Check. In."

"Yes, sir!" Bumblebee said, snapping to a quick salute. Ironhide snorted, but the minibot caught the flash of a smile before the red mech turned away.

"C'mon, let's get ya into your room before they wake up. I've got their damn berth in my subspace and I want it out."

Scrapheaps, Blitzwing thought, flat on his back. Beside him were multiple minibots scurrying around, chattering to themselves as they moved about. He had been building up some sort of plan concerning smashing his way to freedom when the Autobots finally came for him, but a tainted drink of fuel had him passing out before he could even realize what had happened. He considered getting up and stepping on them, but immediately realized the only reason he would be unbound and free while in recharge was because they had some sort of counter-measure in place in case he did. It was interesting to be in the same space as them and not be either fighting or working against a third enemy.

He briefly wondered if Astrotrain was close by, but knew the Autobots would have moved the shuttle to a different location. Not even the Autobots would room the two biggest Decepticons together.

Someone laughed, a quiet little huff of amusement, and his patience was lost in a wash of annoyance. Fucking slag-eaters, he thought and lurched upwards. His battle protocols surged online without his notice, spotting four small but densely built figures dotted around the enclosed space. Someone yelped his name, clearly shocked, and someone stepped toward him, hands raised, but all he saw was a closer target and made a grab for Windcharger.

He fell face-down onto the floor of the living room, his limbs free but feeling roughly twelve times as heavy as lead.

"Well that figures," Gears said, standing beside the prone Decepticon.

"I say we call Optimus and tap out."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're not a quitter, Huffer."

"Yes I am!"

"No one's quitting anything," Brawn snapped before making his way over to their ward. Prisoner? What did it matter, he supposed, catching a sharp corner of a hip with his fingers and flipping the tank over onto his back with one great heave. "Is he alright? I'm not a medic, someone - "

Huffer threw his hands up. "Fine, fine! Not like I couldn't be doing anything else than this." He
paused, optics taking in the slight wince but otherwise perfectly confused (and slightly pissed off) expression on Blitzwing's face and said, "he'll live."

"You didn't even do anything."

"What am I, a nurse-bot?"

"So, I bet you're wondering what's going on." The mech was so big Gears was practically optic-level with him just with the other laying on the ground. Perfect. "Well that's too bad, because we don't really know either. What we do know is that you've got a power dampener installed - "

Blitzwing lunged at him, or at least tried to. Instead he just sort of ended up rolling over onto his stomach again, glaring sullenly at the minibot.

"Good job, dumbaft."

"Huffer! We can't go around calling them names, remember? It's part of the rules."

"Wincharger, I swear to Primus - "

"Shut up!" Brawn bellowed, and the two scowled in response. After a klik he motioned to Gears. "Alright, go on."

"A power dampener installed. Right. You can start all the fights you want, but they're not gonna go anywhere. No one's allowed to fight. Until you're deemed not a threat - " he paused and gave the glowering mech a skeptical glance, " - you're stuck with us."

"Yeah, and we're stuck with him."

Gears hummed an affirmative of Huffer's words. "That's right. We can't leave the apartment. But I like to look at it like this; at least we're back on Cybertron. And we have enough energon no one's on rations anymore."

A few kliks passed in silence. Slowly, Blitzwing levered himself up as his power levels rose until he was on his knees. Even then he noticed he towered over the four minibots, who all stared at him in silence. They looked faintly annoyed, rather than intimidated.

"Sssssso," Windcharger said, looking cautious but hopeful. "Are we good, or no?"

Blitzwing thought about it. He thought about where Megatron probably was, where Astrotrain was, about fueling as often and as much as he liked, and about the power dampener hidden somewhere on his frame. He thought about the four minibots, unconcerned about being in the same space as him.

Then he said, "sure, we're good," before snatching Gears up off the ground and raising him over his head - and collapsed instantly to the floor, the Autobot landing on his helm with a grunt.

"Oh, good."

"Lay off, Huffer." Gears clambered off the huge frame and made for the kitchen, grabbing his roommates along the way. "Come on, let's give him some room."

"So this is your room," Bumblebee said, holding them aloft so they could see.

It was a room, they had to admit. While it was unfortunately smaller than most other rooms created
for the Decepticons, given that it was originally meant as a small storage area for Ironhide, it was significantly bigger - and cleaner - then their old area on the ship. They all agreed on the definite improvement.

"Um... are you awake?" The scout moved them closer, cupping one hand under their combined altmode and poking their right side. "You can un-combine now. You know, you could have some energon?"

*What do you think?*

Viewfinder considered uncombining just to give him a smack. *I don't know, Spyglass, why don't we uncombine and run around in our thinner armor around an Autobot sharpshooter -

*I wasn't being serious! Spectro, you got what I was saying, right?*

...yes?

Viewfinder let his EM field slip down a few frequencies, shoving his annoyance at them. *Give me peace and shut up!*

*Fine! A wall fell from Spyglass's side of the bond. It felt like cold iron against his side. Then the wall rose and his brother howled. Spectro, close the bond off! Clearly he needs his space.*

*Oh. A wall went up. Cold iron on both sides. There was a high chance Spectro had just blocked them both out, and he wouldn't think to unblock them until they separated.*

*Idiots.*

"Let's go see what's on the tv," his host said, picking them up off the berth (and when had he set them down?). "Have you ever seen human tv? It's really... interesting."

Viewfinder seethed. If they had resisted the urge to fight, at least they could make fun of whatever they were forced to watch together. Now he was on his own, with only a chatty Autobot for company. He studied the screen and the simple but adequate surroundings; the couch was soft, the screen free of cracks or water damage. He heard the heavy clink of a fresh cube hitting the table and focused his lens; a perfectly even shimmer of silver across the top made his tank ache. Bumblebee balanced his own cube on his knee, remote in the other hand.

There was a window, long and thin with bars of gold. Electrum, he would guess, and none of the gaps big enough for them to pass through. He thought of guard towers and broken chronometers. Sure, he couldn't see any sort of change in the perpetually dim sky, but the night cycle couldn't be more than a few joors away. They could handle this, he reasoned. The Autobot was entranced by whatever strange melodrama was occurring on-screen, and they were used to long waits.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter copied over kind of... weird so if there's any errors I didn't catch feel free to tell me! Next chapter I cram as many groups into housing as I can so Megatron and OP can move in together we can move forward a little quicker.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Moving day is finally here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Elita could have shouted for all the joy she felt; finally, finally she was done monitoring over two trines worth of sleeping seekers. Their buildings were complete and they could all move in with their appointed Autobots, and she could return to more action-oriented work and keep closer to her soldiers.

"Ironhide, this is Elita. Come in." Silence greeted her; she jabbed visciously at the messaging button. "Ironhide? Ironhide!"

"Hold yer zap-horses, I'm here." He muttered as he slid into view. "Now what's going on over there that has you yellin'?"

"We're two days ahead of schedule, Ironhide. You can tell Optimus all flier related buildings are finished, and to send over the Autobots who are going to be moving with whatever it is they're bringing. I also want the Dinobots to familiarize themselves with the area more."

"...they're all done?"

She sighed. "Ironhide, please tell Optimus what I said. I am officially done with seeker duty."

He saluted, half jokingly. "You got it."

From there, all Elita had to do was wait for Powerglide and Fireflight to show up. She saddled them with seeker duty without hesitation and headed towards the space bridge.

A faintly teal light split the darkened sky as the space bridge lit up, the walls of light fading as Optimus Prime and a good chunk of the Autobot army spilled put onto Cybertron. They were determinedly boisterous, fighting off any worries with sheer volume. Every mech's subspace was stuffed with their belongings and any smaller furnishings they could fit. Optimus had stopped to give a few instructions, a bit of a speech about their bravery in taking the first steps towards peace, and then -

"Autobots! Roll out!" Cheers rose up in response - even the bots who still held a few private reservations were excited. As much as they had (mostly) come to love Earth, everyone was more than ready to return to Cybertron.

Yes, Elita knew. They were all ready to come home.

"God damn it," Sunstreaker said.
The minibots had beaten them. Sideswipe cared a bit less than his brother did - after all, they were now locked away in whatever ridiculous configuration Optimus and Prowl had set up for them - and the twins would bet they wouldn't be seeing them for a long while. Still, Sunstreaker cursed.

"Come on," Sideswipe said, throwing an arm around his brother's shoulders. "Let's go... see if we can find anything else for the apartment again."

"What else is there? We're getting new berths, our - "

"You two!" Ironhide's voice had them both jumping in place. "What are you doing?"

"Uh - "

"You're supposed to be with the Decepticons you're gonna move in with!"

"Are we, though?" Sideswipe asked, his false bravado draining away. Panic filled his spark.

Ironhide, either ignorant of the twin's turmoil or unwilling to let them buckle under it, turned them around and began to steer them towards the medbay. "Don't think I don't know what you two've been doing. Didn't poke your heads inta see the seekers, not once! And I know Ratchet told you to."

"Don't know why," Sunstreaker grumbled.

"Because he said so." It wasn't as if Ironhide had asked why. He wasn't going to be living with any Cons, after all, but he knew the older medic wouldn't have sent the request to the two if he didn't mean it. They went obediently enough, which for the twins was quite a feat, and Ironhide marched them all the way to the side of the Condhead's medslabs.

All yours, Ratch.

Thank you, Ironhide.

As much as Ironhide would have liked to hang around with Ratchet - if only to check up on him and to see any fallout with the twins - he had other obligations and left with a promise to catch up later.

Unbelievable! We've been abandoned.

That's not unbelievable for Ironhide.

Side by side, they stared down at the stasis-struck seekers.

Ugh. Ramjet's paint job.

So the other two are up to your standards?

Hardly.

"So," Ratchet said, startling them both. "Took you long enough."

Sunstreaker crossed his arms. "Long enough to what? Visit them? It's not like they'd know."

"You weren't supposed to visit for their sake, kid." Two identical looks of confusion came over their faces. Ratchet sighed and tucked his tools away. "Did you read the health guidelines I sent you?"

"Yes."
"And the emergency protocols?"

"Yes," Sunstreaker grit out, looking more and more harried. With his arms crossed and shoulders hunched, he looked much more like a nervous youngling than he had in a long time.

"Good." He held out his arms. "C'mere."

Not even Sunstreaker would complain about scuffs if they came from a certified Ratchet Hug. The medic rarely gave them out, and they both jumped at the chance for one. "You must be really worried," the gold bot muttered.

"I think you'll be alright, as long as you can walk away from an argument. Just... call if anything goes wrong. Or even if you just want to talk."

Ratchet didn't bother to tell them to keep an optic on each other, which they appreciated. He did leave them alone with the seekers, which they appreciated less. "Can you tell them apart?"

"They're different colors, Sideswipe."

"I mean, do you know which one is which?"

"I'm sure one of them will tell us."

So that's a no. "At least it might be funny when they wake up and realize where they are. The Cons didn't even stop drinking the energon."

"Bluestreak said they tried, but their tanks were already so low they couldn't go very long."

...Sunny. I have an idea.

For what?

When they wake up.

Ramjet onlined to the disorientating sensation of total silence with Dirge yelling over the bond to wake up, wake up and don't move, the Autobots moved us -

Shut up! He snarled in response, his defense systems stumbling in response to a quick shut down order. Where are they? What...

He could feel two Autobot fields, both terribly familiar.

Should we wake up now?

Thrust was online, equally still and alarmed. Ramjet pushed the order through his mounting panic and they sat up together, jumping to their pedes to face the twins properly, no plan to speak of and barely aware of where they were.

Of course, Ramjet had little need of plans when his nosecone tended to take care of most problems.

Sunstreaker said, "took you long enough."

Then he fell silent and the two groups simply stared at each other, waiting.
Any idea what we're supposed to do here?

Ramjet's mind raced over the many distractions that came to him in that moment; the twins standing before them with clearly little interest in dealing with them, the curious lack of hunger in his system, the fact that he had no idea where the other trines were or Decepticon command, and was it just his paranoia but were there no windows in the entire damn apartment they were stuck in?

Figure it out.

Fine. Thrust straightened up and stalked towards the two - Dirge's confusion took on a twinge of worry - and then Sunstreaker shoved a datapad into the seeker's face. Thrust jerked to a stop and fumbled to take it before Sunstreaker yanked his hand away. "What's that?"

"The rules."

"Have fun," Sideswipe added, the two turning away as one.

Is that it?

He wanted to tell Dirge not to be ridiculous, but the two Autobots had turned away, letting them catch a glimpse of the room beyond until the door closed behind them. Ramjet snatched the datapad up, scanning the short list with a furrowed brow before handing it back to his trine mate. After a moment Thrust snorted and tossed it onto the berth. "Slag them. Bet we're only a few cycles in before Megatron or Screamer come get us."

"They can knock us out remotely? Really?"

His missiles were missing. He ran a deeper scan, dipping in to check for the accompanying hardware only to find it gone. His bombs were gone, too, but the compartments were merely empty rather than filled in or replaced. But his long range weapons systems were offline and no matter how many times he sent the order to reinitialize, it stayed stubbornly silent.

Ramjet had stopped paying attention to his trine, which meant they had gravitated together. He refocused on them to find them hissing insults and crafting ideas to see just how far the terror twins could be pushed.

With a rush of exhaustion he sat down, aft hitting the carpet and back against the berth. He dimmed his optics and let his helm tilt back. Ramjet didn't want to leave Dirge and Thrust alone to egg each other on, but in the end his emotional exhaustion overcame him, and he let himself slip into standby.

Silverbolt had only one other experience to compare their current one to in terms of sheer nerves, and that was flying directly into battle. The aerials had gathered around the three seekers, all of them unconscious but very much real. Slingshot was leaning alarmingly far over them, gaze darting around their colorful frames. "They're... taller than I expected."

Air Raid scoffed. "What does that matter?"

"It doesn't!"

"Hey, keep it down!"

They all looked to the seekers, but none of them so much as twitched. They somehow gave the impression of being bigger than they really were, an impression they all keenly felt, even if none of
them would readily admit to it. They were so much older than the aerials, had lived on this very planet for centuries before the aerials had been sparked. They knew about the old Cybertron.

Ion Storm abruptly rolled onto his side and buried his face in the couch. They all studied the wide expanse of his wings for a klik... or two.

After a moment, Fireflight whispered, "is it just me, or is this whole entire ordeal going way too easy?"

"What are you talking about?" Skydive asked. "It took weeks for us to even get an apartment built!"

"Maybe you're right. I'm sure plenty of terrible things will happen in the future anyway."

"Slingshot," Silverbolt scolded, hyper aware of just about everything but especially the sleeping rainmakers.

Air Raid, tired of his brother's worrying the moment he heard it, stepped toward Acid Storm and said, "let's wake 'em up."

"No!" Silverbolt snapped, grabbing his shoulder. "We have to let them wake up on their own, it's better for them."

"Better how?"

"I don't know! Emotionally better! That's what First Aid said."

Acid Storm groaned and shifted around on the couch, one leg falling to the side. At the thump of a pede hitting the floor, the group went scrambling away from the green seeker. The mech grumbled and lifted his helm, the apertures spiraling wide in shock as he locked optics with the aerials.

"Hello," Silverbolt managed. So far so good, but keeping his words from getting too wobbly or excited was far more daunting than it was three seconds ago.

"What in the pit - "

Ion Storm startled them all by rolling off the couch and landing on his knees, scrambling to his pedes. His wings flared out to help his weak balance, one hand flying to his forehead. "Ow. Ugh."

Nova's head snapped up, mumbling, "I'm up, I'm up," as he swung his legs down - and froze at the gaggle of aerials gaping at him. "Oh... hi."

His brothers clambered at their sides of the bond, pushing him to speak, so he squeaked out a "hi" and fell silent.

The rules! Tell them the rules!

I will, Air Raid! Just... wait. "Are you okay?"

"Yeeeeez?" Nova said, eyeing them as if they were a live bomb. "What are you doing here?"

"This is our new apartment? We live here? Um. Ah, scrap, you went into stasis before - okay. First of all, you're safe."

Nova's voice jumped an octave. "Where's Sunstorm?!"

Fireflight made a noise and pushed past his brothers to get closer. "He's okay! He's with the other
trine and Tracks and Chromia and the other two."

"Other two?"

"He means Firestar and Trailbreaker." Now that he thought about, did the Rainmakers even know about individual Autobots? Would those names mean anything to them? "Okay, I guess I'll start from the beginning. Optimus declared - "

Declared?

Shh!

" - that the Autobots would break into groups and we would live with the Decepticons until they agree to live peacefully - "

Ion Storm burst into violent laughter. Silverbolt was mortified, as were his brothers - until anger surged through Air Raid. He shoved hard at the frequency; Ion dropped to the floor.

"Raid, no!" Silverbolt didn't want to admit the looks of sudden shock on the two seekers faces was an excellent balm to his smarting pride. Guilt and alarm had him springing forward to pick the fallen mech up. Unfortunately he was much too heavy and neither seeker looked ready to move yet. Slingshot, come help me!

Fine, fine.

"So that was... uh. The second part. The frequency. If you try to start fights or hurt anyone we're going to - "

"Drop you like a brick!"

He sighed. Fireflight.

What? It's true.

"What?" Nova Storm finally said. "Wait. Where are the others? Where's... Power-whatever."

"There are no others!" Air Raid proclaimed, planting his hands on his hips and glaring at them. "We're your - " Hey Sky, what's the word?

Stewards?

Ew, no. "Your guards," he finished after a too-long pause.

"Excuse me? You're a bunch of sparklings."

"We're - " Silverbolt began, but Slingshot shouldered his way forward.

"We are not! We're a gestalt. We form - "

"Oh, no. No, no, no." Acid insisted, shaking his head. "You're like... what? Two vorns old?"

Fireflight leaned close to Skydive and whispered, "what's a vorn again?"

"It doesn't matter how old we are," Silverbolt snapped, trying to regain everyone's attention. "Prime placed us in charge of you, and - "
Ion Storm groaned from the couch. "Hn-uh. Hm-mm."

"Yeah, no," Nova continued. "I've had engex older than you. Go to your room or whatever."

He felt Air Raid reach for the frequency and shoved at his end of the bond. No! "No, listen. Shockwave is living with Moonracer and the two science bots. Megatron is with Optimus. And the command trine are with Skyfire, and everyone else is either in a cell or already in their new housing. This is, you know, it. You can't get through the front door - "

Acid Storm, either frustrated by the torrent of bad news or simply uninterested in being told he couldn't do something, marched over to the door and punched it. "Frag! What is that? That's not iron."

"No, it's durasteel, and that's why you can't break it."

The green seeker promptly kicked it instead. Ion leveled himself up, grimacing once at the metallic thuds before letting himself collapse again. "Acid, knock it off." Once the noise finally stopped, he turned his helm towards the aerials and laid it on his arm. "Okay, fine. We're listening. What do you want?"

Silverbolt heaved an internal sigh of relief. "Just... don't start fights, I guess? We're going to be living together for a while, I bet. And we won't start anything either. This isn't supposed to be like prison, Optimus hopes that eventually you'll agree to peace and you can get your own housing and, you know, not have to be under house arrest. The other fliers are moving into their apartments, so you can call them on the HUB to see how they're doing."

"There are no windows in here."

The young leader looked surprised before pointing at a smaller room, connected to what Ion assumed was the 'main' room. "There's a window in the kitchen. And we've set up a fence around this big open space where we can go flying whenever you want, so you won't get flight sickness or anything."

Primus, Acid whispered to him over the trine bond. Silverbolt must have taken Ion's silence as a negative reaction, because he started trying to explain that the designated flight area was really very large, and something about ankle bracelets and perimeter fences, and the fact that a mere youngling seemed to think the entire set up was in any way acceptable had Ion cutting him off with a quick, "okay."

"Really? I mean, okay. I promise it's really big! Skyfire and Powerglide and Cosmos made sure of that. And ... we have movies. And datapads and energon and we could - "

"You could tell us about Vos!" Fireflight suggested, before Air Raid elbowed him sharply in the side.

"Or we could watch movies and talk about something else," Silverbolt forced out through the mortifying flush rising to his faceplates. He heard Fireflight's angry little hiss of you slagger! and felt Slingshot's embarrassment and amusement, no matter how he tried to muffle it. "But you don't have to."

The seekers exchanged looks, and Ion nodded. "Is that door over there the one to our rooms?"

"Yes?"

"Great. Thanks." The trine moved as one and left the aerials alone in the living room, their door
closing with a polite click.

"That went... well."

Fireflight let out a small sigh. "I know we agreed not to expect anything, but... I guess I thought they'd at least talk with us a little."

Air Raid's irritation at the implication that he would want anything to do with the Decepticon seekers came over the bond loud and clear. A bit too loud, if he was being honest. Air Raid had spent their last days of freedom being adamantly not interested in the seekers as much as possible. "It's okay. They need some time and space to settle in and stuff. We have to do that too."

Fireflight let out a long sigh, slumping over theatrically as he headed off to their room. Silverbolt expected he would flop face-down on a berth and stay there. Probably not even on his own berth. Air Raid went to the kitchen, seeking out the energon dispensor - and after a klik, Slingshot followed. Silverbolt weighed both options and abruptly realized he didn't have to go and try to get them calmed down before something or someone around the Ark set them off. He didn't have to report on his brothers, after all, just the trine. His brothers would be in arm's reach as long as the seekers refused to play nice, and they could handle being civil on their own. He could just go and watch As The Kitchen Sinks until it was time to recharge.

While he would never have described life with the Autobots as stressful, having a significant amount of time to do nothing was brand new.

So he took a seat in the living room.

"Let's watch something."

Silverbolt jumped and looked to the side; sitting to his right on the far side of the couch was Skydive. "Yeah, sure."

"Look at this couch," his brother marveled, sliding his palm over the soft material. "It's in an L shape. Hoist and Grapple didn't make this, did they?"

"No way." Air Raid and Slingshot reappeared, carrying five cubes between them. "Sunstreaker said the Autobots went and stole a bunch of stuff from other buildings for everyone to use."

"It's scavenging, Raid, not stealing!"

"What's the difference? It's not like anyone is going to come back and want them."

"Hey, call Fireflight," Skydive whispered.

Hey. We're watching movies and we have energon. I think the others got into the flavorings and stuff because there's crystals at the bottom.

...which movies?

I don't know yet, so come help us pick a few.

His brother sent a quick ping and a moment later came bounding out of their shared room, plopping down next to Skydive and reaching for his cube with a smile.

Nova Storm took a look around their shared room and said, "that was so depressing."
Ion, however, couldn't help but be taken aback. He had expected they would have three berths in one room, but no; this was one room, with doors to the sides leading to the other two rooms. He hadn't had a room to himself for longer than he wanted to think about. The berth was big enough that he wouldn't have his pedes or wings hanging off the edge, he had some shelving along the walls, a chest for storing stuff - but most curiously were the trinkets sitting on the shelves. Nothing too valuable, but rocks and crystals and some sort of soft, brittle thing that made him think it came from the planet Earth lined the walls like tiny sentries. And, somehow, it reminded him of an earlier thought.

"Who are the science bots?"

Nova rotated on the toe of his pede, giving his trine mate a baffled look. "What?"

"The two science bots living with Shockwave," Ion repeated, expression pensive. "Who are they?"

Acid Storm sighed and finally sat down on the berth. The pleasant bounce did nothing for his mood. "He meant Lancer and Greenlight."

"Those two can do science stuff?"

"I don't know, I guess? I heard Shockwave mention they were scientists once."

"You didn't tell us that!"

"Who cares?" Acid fell back on the berth, shuttering his optics. "We're stuck with a bunch of newbuilds as guards. And I'm hungry."

"I wonder what the other trines are doing. I haven't seen the Coneheads in an age."

"Call them! The kid said we could do that."

Ion grimaced. "Maybe we should give them until tomorrow. They might not even be awake yet. In fact, since my tank is full enough, I thought I'd check out the washracks. I feel grimy."

"Sounds nice," Acid muttered, arm laid over his optics. "Have fun."

"Hey." Ion patted his ankle. "At least the kids are cute. Dirge wasn't lying about that. And they don't seem to hate us..."

"I don't know, that one who knocked you on your aft didn't seem so friendly."

They all laughed quietly, even Acid Storm. It felt as if he had flown into the side of a mountain, his systems all lagging in sluggish confusion, save for his racing emotions. The aerials were very young and seemed fairly open to overtures of friendship... which at least seemed like an interesting avenue to go down. They would contact the other trines too, first thing tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Hello readers. Originally Sunstorm and the other trine were going to have a scene with their accompanying Autobots, but I felt like this chapter was already running a bit long, so they'll show up next time. As always, feedback is appreciated, especially if you see any mistakes. I promise we're getting close to the big MegOP move in day. Happy
reading!
The sun had just peeked over the horizon, sending hues of pink and orange light across the sky. Tracks could see them reflected off rows and columns of windows, lending faint flashes of color to the towers of gray and blue. It was perfect for a morning drive, but standing outside the Roll Out! auto-repair shop, he felt like his spark was disintegrating. "Optimus said it might be a while, but I'll come back to visit as soon as I can."

At the break of dawn in a slightly run-down mechanic shop, Raoul looked just the same as ever. The only difference was he had left his jacket and gloves off. "I know you will, it's just... you know. It's not gonna be the same without you around, but I get it. I think. Now come down here."

Tracks, loath to let the dirty streets scrape against his immaculate paint job, carefully knelt down on one knee so he could lean down. Raoul - small, determined, impulsive Raoul - reached up and fit his arms around his neck. He laid his hand across the old fire-red shirt, thinking of dance clubs and midnight rides through the city. "Don't be so down, Raoul. We'll still talk - "

"Yeah, I know that." His friend let go, backing up a bit as he shoved his hands in his pockets. "Well, be careful. You know not to turn your back on the Cons. I'll get your weird alien phone all set up at the apartment this weekend."

"Good." Tracks, wanting to avoid prolonging their goodbye, took refuge in his altmode. It would be so easy to crack his door and offer one more ride, but the others were waiting for him. "You better keep out of trouble, at least until I get back."

"No promises, but I'll do my best."

Spark aching, Tracks pulled away and forced himself to pick up speed. The figure of his favorite human grew smaller and smaller until he took a turn and lost sight of him. He thought he was at least making good time, but it seemed Chromia thought otherwise.

**Hey, Tracks, what's taking you so long?**

*I was just finishing up some Earth business.*

She left him alone, thankfully. Tracks didn't drag his pedes on getting to the space bridge with the rest of his group, but he made sure to take in the sights around him one last time. The city was as lively as ever, the downtown streets clogged with humans in flashy clubwear, standing in lines for the chance to dance, serious looking men in business suits and college students looking for a good time. Neon purple light spilled out from an arcade, accompanied by a poppy synth.

Primus, he would miss this planet.

But, when his homeworld materialized around him, he knew he didn't regret volunteering.

Sunstorm sighed, his head resolutely hidden in his arms. It had been his third sigh yet, but sounded no less sincere for it.
"Hey... Sunstorm. You feeling any, uhh," he looked to Bitstorm, who shrugged. "Better? Yet?"

He sat up, surprising them all as he gazed at the wall. "I have long expected such treatment, as the harold of Primus. Even if I forgive them, He may not."

"Oh." Nacelle thought for a klik and decided to tap out. As he took a seat, their trine leader pointed Hotlink forward.

He hunched over, not wanting to hover over the younger mech when he was in such a mood. "At least it doesn't hurt, right?"

Sunstorm seemed as if he were going to ignore him until he glanced down at the device that ringed his waist. It was almost a dead match for his paint job, although they had only realized it was electrum and not gold when they failed to remove it. He slipped the edge of a finger between it and his armor, frowning. "I suppose."

Someone knocked on the door and Sunstorm turned away from them, staring resolutely at an empty shelf above the berth.

"Hello?" The door cracked, and a mech poked his helm in. Hotlink noticed Chromia standing near him, back against the wall and apparently interested in something down the hall. "Oh, good. Hi. We were going to have our evening fuel and noticed none of you had had anything yet... so..."

"I am not refueling until I've spoken to Starscream," Sunstorm proclaimed, crossing his arms for good measure.

They heard a faint growl of annoyance, and then Chromia shouldered her way past the door. "I told you, Skyfire said he refuses to come out of his room and won't take any calls."

The younger seeker's helm whipped around. "Who is Skyfire!?"

"He's a flier. He and Starscream used to know each other, or something. Come have some fuel," she added, propping the door open with her pede and motioning down the hall.

Nacelle looked between the open invitation and his trine leader, but Bitstorm shook his head. From behind them, the femme let out a sigh. Nacelle saw her tap the bigger mech on the shoulder before she left, the faint tap of her pedes fading away. The other Autobot looked alarmed before he schooled his features into something more friendly. "Well, you're welcome to come out of here and fuel or get to know us a bit better. Or just look around. Or... anything."

Bitstorm squinted at him. "Who are you, again?"

"I'm Trailbreaker? From Earth?"

Sunstorm muttered, "barren planet."

"That's not true, there are plenty of living things all over it. The humans and animals and plants... and whatever's in the ocean."

Nacelle side-eyed the Earth Autobot. He tried to comfort himself with the idea that Trailbreaker was merely bulky, not bigger than them all, but the attempt failed quickly. None of them had ever seen any Autobots aside from Elita and her soldiers for vorns upon vorns, and the news upon waking that there were not only more, but that they were converging on Shockwave's headquarters had sent the two trines into a panic. Nacelle hadn't even realized the Rainmakers had gone outside to try and catch them off-guard when a stasis bolt had struck him in the back of the helm and he had passed
As Nacelle struggled to decide if being stuck with two new Autobots was better or worse than the two familiar ones, Sunstorm broke the silence. "You three can go."

"Excuse me?" Bitstorm asked, wings jerking upward in offence.

Either the somber mech didn't notice his tone, or didn't care. "I mean you can leave the room. You don't have to sit here with me, if that's what you were doing."

Hotlink snorted. "As if I want to see Firestar's smug face."

Nacelle, however, stood. "I'm going out."

"What!"

"I'm going to go and collect information."

Nacelle, what the frag do you think you're doing?

Bitstorm, I'm hungry.

I told you to stay here!

For how long?

It doesn't matter how long, it was an order!

A stir of anger had him straightening up, locking optics with his leader. Hotlink sent a nervous please don't start fighting here across the bond, but Nacelle was tired of the faint ache in his tank. He shoved an irritated two cycles, Hotlink! at them both, but Bitstorm only looked furious.

Well, fine. He ignored an outraged, "Nacelle, don't you dare - " and shot out the door, closing it quietly behind him. Pressed again the only way back to his quarters, which now contained a very angry trine leader, he cycled his vents a few times to calm down. As his frame quieted he realized he could hear the soft chatter of conversation and activity. Someone laughed, the sound peaking and dying quickly.

Nacelle, you better get back in here this instant.

Leave me alone! He snapped, wincing at the flush of shocked hurt in response. We've been in there for two cycles and nothing's happened! I want to see what's going on.

Behind the door, Bitstorm was digging his fingers into the seams in his arms, trying to figure out what to do. Nacelle had never ignored a direct order before, not on or off the battlefield. After a klik, he turned to pleading. It's not safe out there.

Well it's not safe in there! They can just come into the room whenever they want. He could feel Bitstorm struggling to find another argument, another reason to stay together, but Nacelle didn't want to be argued into agreement. Think of it as a scouting mission.

...what?

A scouting mission. I'll go talk to them and see how the layout is and then I'll report back.

A klik crawled by, followed by another. Whatever conversation they were having had continued
unimpeded, the silent drama of the trine drawing no attention. Finally he received a ping of acknowledgement. *Fine, go. Don't do anything stupid.*

*No more stupid than usual,* he promised.

When he finally got up the courage to peak around the hallway into the so-called "living room", Firestar noticed him first. She punched Chromia in the shoulder and said, "look, one of 'em came out!"

Chromia responded by punching her back. "Thank you, Firestar, I hadn't noticed."

The mech sitting across from her took one look at him and winced. "So much dark gray and blue..."

"Well we can't all be fashion-plates, Tracks." Trailbreaker waved. "Hi! You're... Bit... no," he said, noticing the frown quickly overtaking the seeker's face. "Hotlink?"

"That's Nacelle."

"Thanks, Firestar," he muttered, taking a lone chair for his own. It was squishier than expected. She wiggled her fingers at him in greeting, a small cube of engex sitting on her knee.

A larger cube slid along the table to him and Nacelle looked up to see Trailbreaker grinning. "Guess I won the bet."

"What was the bet?"

"That it would take less than three cycles for one of you to come out."

Chromia nodded. "I said five."

"I see. Did you win anything?"

"Absolutely nothing," he admitted with smile, settling back in the couch with a long sigh of relief. "Unless you count meeting new bots."

Chromia was staring at him. Not glaring, but a calm measured stare was no more comfortable than a scowl coming from her. Firestar looked from him to her friend and then gently nudged her in the side. "Hey, Chromia, you might still get the five days guess with Sunstorm."

*Huh.* "Why him? Is Sunstorm special?"

"He's in a class of his own," Chromia cut in, neatly killing the conversation before it could wander into too informative waters. "And his personality is... interesting."

"I heard he's like the stunticons," Trailbreaker added. "Is that true, Nacelle?"

"Um, I don't know. I've never met the stunticons."

"Really? They're a really young gestalt of grounders created for the Decepticons, because Megatron wanted - "

Nacelle tried to pull relevant information from the strange story Trailbreaker had woven together, apparently for his benefit, but he was left mostly confused. Why hadn't Shockwave woken them up when this was happening? Why were the stunticons so glitchy? Worst of all, was any of this relevant? He had forgotten that information recovery wasn't listed under his skill set for a reason, and couldn't help but think he should have made Hotlink come with him.
But, he noticed, Chromia wasn't staring at him anymore. She was talking quietly with Firestar, drawing lines in the air with a fingertip to illustrate something. Trailbreaker's easy conversation had filled the room, with the only quiet spot being a very attractive and very silent Tracks seated in an overstuffed white chair. He looked far more interested in his drink than anything else.

With renewed determination, Nacelle settled back into his seat and held his drink close, letting Trailbreaker move on to another unusual Earth adventure. He didn't need Hotlink to mind for information, all he needed to do was let the Earth bot keep talking. He could handle that on his own just fine.

Blast Off woke to a ringing in his audials and a pain in his neck, head tilted awkwardly to the side. The ceiling looked different, the floor was hard, and then the unmistakable hand of his commander came into view. "Onslaught...?"

That warm, heavy hand landed on his shoulder, giving it a quick squeeze. "Yeah, it's me."

"My processor's all fuzzy. What happened?"

"The Bots moved us, remember? We're in their new housing they made. They put you in the washracks when it looked like you were gonna be sick."

He didn't feel sick, thankfully. Uninterested in his surroundings, he shunted the new information aside and focused on the one blank spot of the gestalt bond. Still unsteady, Blast Off scrambled to his pedes, exhaling sharply when the room tilted and slid. "Is Vortex -"

"He's still out, but he's on his berth. Come."

He envied the speed with which his leader had found his balance and did his level best not to pitch forward and fall against his back when they started walking. His spark twinged, fluctuating with stress, and it only lessened once he saw Vortex laid out on one of many berths, snoring softly while Swindle poked at his face.

"Look at 'im, the big idiot. I could pick his subspace and he'd never even know," Swindle said, feeling around the helm of their helicopter for any strange marks or dents.

Onslaught snorted. "If you were going to, you wouldn't say it out loud."

"Is he okay?" Blast Off asked, taking note that Brawl was not present.

"Is he okay? He's been sleeping his aft off while we all put up with the Autodorks! Of course he's okay."

Blast Off wondered if Swindle knew that 'dork' was not actually considered a devastating insult on Earth but let it go. "You sound like a newbuild. Where's Brawl?"

"Getting fuel."

"It's fueling time?"

Onslaught chuckled to himself, and the sound carried an odd, bitter note. "We can have fuel any time we want. The Autobots figured out a way to create it quickly and they've been stockpiling."

Blast Off couldn't think of what to say to that, so he returned his attention to Vortex, sleeping
peacefully while they all worried and failed to distract each other from what had happened. Inside the apartment, it felt real and permanent.

We lost. The Decepticons lost.

"Think I should shake him awake or would that, I dunno, rattle his brain module or something?"

"Swindle, if doing loops and barrel-rolls didn't shatter his brain module in his helm, why would shaking him do it?"

"Good point," he admitted before grabbing Vortex by his shoulders and viciously shaking him awake. "GET UP!" Vortex's optics flew up and he smacked Swindle right in the face. "Ow, fuck!"

"Geh offa me," Vortex slurred, giving his head one quick shake. "Ugh. Ugh. I feel awful."

Swindle scowled, resentfully rubbing his nasal ridge. "Good."

A knock startled them all, and Blast Off turned to stare at a second door he hadn't noticed. It cracked, and then a helm painted in bright reds and white poked its way in. "Is everything alright? I have some extergeo if anyone feels like they might purge..."

Vortex dropped his head back on the berth with a muttered, "get lost."

The door swung open, revealing a concerned looking Hot Shot hovering behind the medic. "Well it's nice to see you too, Vortex."

Onslaught glowered. "It's you."

"Aaaaand that's our cue. Come on, Aid." The protectobot leader pulled his team mate away, but not before giving them a quick, jaunty wave.

"Do you think," Vortex began, in a tone of slow wonder, "that Megatron is putting up with this?"

Onslaught scoffed. "I doubt the Autobots even get him out of his cell."

"He's been refusing fuel for over three weeks now, which is twice as long as anyone else."

"He can barely go three weeks?"

"I told you they weren't healthy. I hope you didn't think I had First Aid write up those refueling guidelines for fun."

Ratchet's comments had no effect on their last remaining prisoner. Megatron had abandoned his aloof demeanor and instead was standing in his cell, quiet but clearly displeased. "So," he said, his optics a dim, dark red. "You have my entire army."

"They're all safe, I swear it."

"Come on in then, Prime. You can't say you didn't think it would come to this."

"I won't engage in a fight unless I have to."

Megatron gave his helm a little shake. Optimus supposed from his point of view, he was acting quite unreasonable for an enemy. He stepped aside regardless, letting Ironhide fire a net through the
energon bars. It split neatly in half, following the arc of the blade in the gray hand.

"How in the slaggin' pit -"

Jazz hit the last switch in a set of four as Optimus barreled past his friend and through the newly dissolved bars. Megatron cut wildly through the air, forcing Optimus to stay at arm’s length. A shallow cut danced across his neck cabling, but that small sacrifice allowed him to get in a solid hit to Megatron's chestplate. The gray mech stumbled, stunned enough his grip slackened and the vibro-blade fell to the floor. Then the sturdy white figure of Ratchet materialized by his side, shoving his closed fist against Megatron's throat. For a split second Optimus felt his spark seize in confusion, because surely Ratchet wasn't trying to choke Megatron -

His friend grabbed the sagging frame and settled him down on the bench, grunting under the effort. "Optimus, get over here, he weighs more than a damn dump truck -"

"You exaggerate," he said, hauling Megatron over so he could lay him down properly.

He stooped down and plucked a thin, empty tube from the base of Megatron's throat. "Me? Never."

"What on Earth?"

"Emergency tranq," the medic replied, hastily pulling a stasis net from his subspace to throw over Megatron. "He’ll be fine. Might wake up with a bit of a headache, but considering he hid a blasted knife somewhere somehow -"

But Optimus had noticed the hollow space just at the bottom of his heelstrut during their brief struggle. "He hid it in his pede. I wonder if he had Hook modify it for him..."

"He most certainly did." Ratchet ran his thumb along the inside of the tiny compartment and reached for the small toolset in his subspace. The crevice was definitely not standard. "Optimus, I know we were on a schedule, but I have to look him over before you transport him. I need to be sure -"

"- that there aren't any other surprises. Is there anything you need?"

Ratchet had taken a seat on the bottom of the bench, one of Megatron's pedes in his lap. He applied the tip of a thin scraping tool to the toe seam, the faint scritch scritch setting his denta on edge. "Just a bit of time and space. I'll call you back when I'm done."

Ironhide and Jazz moved towards the Prime at the old medic's dismissal, but Optimus shook his helm and motioned at Ratchet. The weapons expert hesitated, but only for a moment; stasis net and tranquilizer or not, Ratchet was in more danger than Optimus would be. He leaned against the cell wall as their leader slipped out, arms crossed. Jazz shrugged and sunk onto the cold floor, dimming his visor.

As much as he enjoyed the company of his friends, Optimus found being alone a welcome relief. He was glad his Autobots were mostly all in their new apartments, regardless of whether they had Decepticon roommates or not. He had wanted to avoid Megatron's moving day becoming a spectacle. He had even half-hoped the warlord would slip up and drink the spiked energon, as unlikely as that outcome had been.

He had been surprised it had worked on Soundwave, but if the Decepticons were even half as malnourished as Ratchet claimed they were - and Optimus had no reason not to believe him - he supposed the carrier mech had had to fuel for his symbiotes' sakes.

As he traveled around the Ark, a mixture of nostalgia and anxiety began to pool in his tank. The rare
mornings he had enjoyed refueling with friends, attending charities and events for schools with his soldiers, the rare times they had unwound enough to have a movie night - all of it would be gone for, if not quite forever, at least a very long time. Since he had onlined and been assigned to the docks, he had lived with other bots; he had rotated through a handful of recharge shacks before finding his place with Dion and Ariel, and eventually his Autobots. He had never lived with just one bot before, and now - how long would they live together? The difference between centuries or millennia was dependent entirely on how much common ground with Megatron he could find.

He trusted in the Matrix. He had to. But nothing could completely extinguish the little flicker of worry that this venture might not work out quite how he wanted.

"Why Prime not with Ratchet?"

Optimus jerked out of his musings. It was a rare instance that Grimlock did not have at least one of his brothers around him, but Optimus could see he had just rounded the corner - alone. "Grimlock. I figured you would be with your brothers."

"Brothers want relaxation. Grimlock want... time. Why Prime not with Decepticon?"

"Ratchet is taking a closer look at a few modifications we found to make sure he isn't a threat. I thought I would take a look around the Ark before I left."

The metallic approximation of one of Earth's most terrifying, ancient predators shrugged. "Still as orange as you left it."

"Right," he laughed, caught off-guard by his own amusement. "I suppose I was just feeling nostalgic. Or a little worried."

"What Prime have to worry about? Extra Autobots keep optic out for other threats. Dinobots patrol Earth base, help humans."

There was no love lost between Prime and Grimlock, although the Autobot leader did not harbor any old feelings towards him. They had both made a choice they later came to regret, although there were times when Optimus thought the dinobot might have other ideas. But he had seen how carefully Grimlock and his brothers were around Ratchet and especially Wheeljack, and laid any concerns to the side. He had trusted them all this time, and they had not betrayed it yet - he saw no reason to think they would now.

"I know." Jazz and Ironhide and Elita and Red Alert and all the rest. He knew they would be fine. They would be more than fine; busy with all the work they wanted to catch up, busy with trying to reach out into the depths of space to catch a sign that other Cybertronians were still functioning, busy trying to plan for infrastructure work when they returned to Cybertron, busy with checking in on their fellow (ex-) soldiers. "I know," he said again, trying to mean it.

"Dinobots handle anything," Grimlock said, snapping his tail down hard on the floor for emphasis.

Stalling, he thought to himself. The Earth was as safe as it had been before they arrived on it, perhaps even a little bit safer considering the odder events they had survived and conquered. He took hold of the little part of his emotional matrix running in circles, shrieking that he was leaving his Autobots, and shoved it down. His soldiers were perfectly capable of handling themselves, and despite their rocky beginnings with the Dinobots, they were dependable. They didn't mind the humans and they did like the planet, and had instantly accepted the offer to spend most of their time on the Ark base and Earth. Grimlock had just one request - that he answered to Ironhide and not Prowl.
Given that Prowl had the stunticons to keep an optic on, Optimus found it perfectly acceptable. He still did. But part of him worried, constantly, and it had always been a struggle to shut it off.

Don't be stupid, he told himself, watching the leader of the dinobots watch him. His Autobots had won a war. Surely they could handle the aftermath. "Of course you can."

Grimlock gave a sharp nod, his massive head dipping down once before he turned away. He offered no explanation or excuse, and part of Optimus appreciated it. They didn't need small talk.

He had wandered through most of the base and had found his way to Teletraan, who had always offered him a wealth of human television to waste time on. Barely a quarter of the way through the poorly thought-out movie sequel to As The Kitchen Sinks, rescue arrived in the form of Ratchet.

Well, it's just as bad as I thought.

Oh, do tell, Optimus would have replied, if his sense of self preservation hadn't kicked in. Instead he turned off Teletraan and made his way back toward the holding cells.

What is it?

He had someone - I assume Hook - remove his pede plating and cut away part of his protoform. It's badly scarred, unsurprisingly, looks like an infection took hold early on and had to be treated. Beyond that it doesn't seem to have affected him in any other way. I also found two others.

Only two?

Only two where protoform was removed. He had a few other secret compartments but they were just part of his frame, not a mod. I don't know what Hook was working with, that level of damage is ridiculous. What was he rinsing the tools with, sea water?

Optimus let his friend segue into a long, comfortable rant where he derided Hook's medical ethics, the no doubt filthy state of his medbay, and Megatron's poor decision making skills.

Astoria, upon her last visit to the Ark and shortly before the end of the war, had managed to talk Powerglide into showing her the new holding cells. Optimus had no idea why she had wanted to see them, but apparently she had declared the trip "like going into the belly of a whale". After a rather confusing conversation with Chip, Carly and Spike, Optimus had come to understand what she was referring to. He thought he felt a shadow of what Astoria had, marching ever closer to the consequences of his own decisions with no escape in sight.

Ratchet greeted him at the door, an unconscious Megatron strapped to a medslab by his side. Someone must have gone to fetch it. "There you are. Considering the mech in question, I thought it would be better to transport him this way than to carry him."

"I trust your judgement," he said, and Ratchet rolled his optics.

"I know. It also got Ironhide to stop his mother-henning."

"I'm just sayin' Megatron has always been a pain in the backside and it'd be better ta keep him restrained 'til we get to the apartment."

"Sure sounds like mother-henning to me." Jazz elbowed Ironhide in the side, and Optimus slipped past the weapons expert to take his place on Megatron's other side.

"I'm sure the four of us can handle one unconscious warlord."

"Ex-warlord," he couldn't help but add, taking hold of the medslab and pushing it towards the exit.
Ratchet snorted. "I'd like to be there the cycle you say that to his face."

The Ark was nearly empty, and they slipped through the bright halls without anyone approaching them. Walking next to the still form of his worst enemy and one of his oldest friends, Optimus felt oddly calm. His mind drifted between half-formed ideas of what Megatron might do upon waking, but he failed to imagine anything that couldn't be dealt with. "Ratchet?"

"What is it?"

"Did he have anything else hiding on him? Besides the knife?"

"Just a chunk of raw energon."

"I see." The massive doorway they had spilled out of, time and time again, to go to war was already open. No doubt the dinobots had left it that way, free of the worry that they would be infiltrated. It wasn't as if they had Ravage to worry about, after all.

The space bridge wasn't far, thankfully, even if they had to go a little slower to maneuver the medslab. Four tiny wheels with a heavy load had difficult going over the rocky surroundings, and if Ironhide made more than a few remarks about "accidentally" dropping Megatron, Optimus let it go. Because it didn't matter much when he found himself on the precipice of the space bridge, the massive blue ring his scientists had reworked to move more Cybertronians and massive hauls of energon.

Something touched his shoulder; he turned to see Ratchet drawing his hand away. "Pr- Optimus. Are you ready?"

He felt the storm of emotions lessen a bit at the question. If something were to go wrong, if he needed it, his friends were only a call away. "Yes, I believe I am."

Chapter End Notes

*Travis voice* is he though?? Sorry this update took longer than expected! I got 75% of it done and then the last 25% just fought me every step of the way. But now it's here and I hope you enjoy it. Next chapter, Megatron wakes up.
Chapter 16

Megatron realized what had happened before he even woke up; the damn Prime had got one over on him. He wasn't surprised by it, of course, three weeks without fuel on top of chronic undernourishment tended towards a bit of a disadvantage. But, with no alternative other than letting the Autobots drug him, he had refrained. Instead he sat in his cell and watched his soldiers curse and promise threats to the Autobots who came and carried the unconscious mechs away - all except Skyfire, who they were oddly cowed by - and refused to wait for his turn. If the Autobots wanted him, their Prime would have to come in and get him the old fashioned way.

He sat up and peered around the area he was in and recognized it as the extra luxury it was; a living room. Usually used by bots who made enough shanix that they could afford to have a room dedicated to wasting time, he had never owned a living space with one before. This one was not too big, although it did contain two chairs and a couch, but it was obvious the room had no other notable use. He had been laying on the couch, and any sign of a Prime was entirely absent.

Now, where on Cybertron could he be?

He checked the doors first, half expecting Optimus to be hiding behind one. Surprisingly only one was locked; the others lead to two rooms with a berth each, a washracks area of acceptable size, and a room that was clearly dedicated to energon storage and refueling. The single door that was locked was the front door, but no combination of kicking, striking or slamming his body against it wrung so much as a rattle from it. The Constructicons had once used the argument that Hoist and Grapple were competent architects as an excuse for their cross-factional project and Megatron had to admit they had been truthful. Even fully fueled, there was no way he could break down the door.

He quickly learned there was only a small, single window in one of the berth rooms, and could guess that it probably wasn't his. He noted that it was a long window, but only around a hand's width high and shot through with what looked suspiciously like electrum.

The rooms were not precisely ostentatious, but at the same time he couldn't hold back a scowl at some of the wastefulness. What was the point of a high table in the energon dispenser and fuel storage area, and a second low table in the living room?

Slightly irritated, he went back and double checked the rooms. There was nothing useful in the berth room, but he discovered there were not only solvents and cloths but also waxes, paints and sponges for deep cleaning and detail work in the washracks area. There was a closet full of shelves, filled with extra blankets, towels, and padding for their helms - or to mold the topography of the berth into something more appealing.

Useless but technically harmless items everywhere, and not a Prime in sight. There was a television he didn't bother to turn on and a communications HUB in the living room he couldn't gain access to. His internal fuel gauge pinged him, alerting him to his low fuel levels, so Megatron finished his more thorough exploration with a return to the kitchen.

The Prime had left food out for him.

That fact danced just on the edge of insult - although held captive, he was hardly helpless, nor incapable of taking care of his own basic needs. It was also just unassuming enough to not offend him, and he surveyed the bowl of circuit chips warily. There was a smaller container next to it, most likely a garnish or condiment.
It was a comfort food, of sorts. Made from "dead" metal, sections of circuitry would be cleaned, hacked up, combined with iron bits, and electro-fried in oil until their complimentary flavors had combined. The oil would be drained, any masses of food broken down again, and served up crisp, possibly with a side of mercury sauce.

He'd had it a few times, crowded around a grimy table with the other manual laborers in some cheap dive. The food had been no doubt as clean as the establishment, and the old oil - most certainly recycled from past frying - had given it an almost plastic-y aftertaste, one that clung to the back of his intake. The amount of iron was modest, and there had been no mercury sauce.

He wondered where Prime had gotten them from. Did one of the Autobots have an affinity for cooking? Or had he raided some long-abandoned store for edibles? As he popped a chip into his mouth, it occurred to Megatron the food might be from Earth. His chewing slowed, alarmed at the thought of ingesting any organic substance, but all he could detect was the salt-sharp taste of iron shavings, the slightly bitter chip, and the delicate flavor of clean oil.

He popped the lid off the container. Mercury sauce. Did Prime think he could be tamed with food, when he had lived his life on low-grade for thousands of vorns?

Maybe it had been tampered with. Although their Autobot captors hardly had to resort to contaminating their food if they wanted to subdue them (for now). His accessed the message again; fuel levels were still at twenty-seven percent. He could hardly plan an escape or find a way to contact his subordinates running on fumes. While the chips had very little in them that could be processed into fuel, he knew where the energon dispenser was, and a little variety would no doubt do his system good. Feeling only a little uneasy for reasons he couldn't decipher, Megatron took his seat at the table.

The end of the first, long day was daunting. Every nanoklik that ticked by was one more lost to captivity, and though the change of location shouldn't have meant much in the grand scheme of events, the apartment held a sense of permanency the cells had not. Still, Megatron did not despair. He had spent his earliest vorns in the lower levels of their planet and had pulled free in the end; he would be rid of this place, whether it was ten joors or ten vorns from now.

Exhaustion tugged at his frame, and in the end not all the anger and paranoia on the planet could keep him on his pedes. He wandered to the room that was meant to be his, and reassessed. It was of fair size with possession of a berth, desk and chair. Above the desk were shelves lined with datapads, and on the left of the room sat a small storage unit. An attempt to move it revealed it was either bolted or magnetized to the floor (he bet bolted, since it would not even slide). The darkness of the room made the berth too tempting to pass up, even in a fit of pique, and he turned to sit down on it, one hand reaching back to brace himself.

Where reliable metal should have been was instead filled with something soft and far too giving; his arm went out from under him and his spark juddered in shock at the unexpected drop. Almost flat on his back with his legs hanging off the side, Megatron realized he was laying on a berth covered in what was quite possibly organic in nature. Not just organic, but clearly from that damnable planet Earth! He tried to push his body upright but stopped when his hand sunk alarmingly far into the soft bedding. The sharp angles it was cut at and the dark of the room had hidden it's true form, but closer inspection revealed it was porous and thankfully synthetic. He was not laying on the biggest sponge from the sea, but instead some sort of dense, foam padding.

It was just the perfect size for someone of his weight class, and again, he wondered where Optimus was. It seemed strange that his first day would conclude without the Prime showing up to lecture him.
As if summoned by his very thoughts, Megatron heard the distant sound of a door opening and closing and jumped back to his pedes.

He hadn't quite figured out a plan when he sighted Prime and blind rage took over. Barreling into the frame of his enemy, he felt a slice of triumph cut through his fury until he unceremoniously lost control of his body.

"I suppose I brought that on myself, letting you wake up unsupervised."

Arms tugged around his shoulders, pulling him around into a carrying hold. He willed all his strength into his arm, then his hand, and finally just his fingers. They barely managed to twitch, let alone curl in to a proper fist. He was so distracted he barely noticed when the Prime laid him out on the couch.

"What...is..."

"Wheeljack's latest invention. It's a safeswitch in case you get violent. All I need to do is access the frequency and - " Optimus snapped his fingers.

If Megatron had had such control at the time, he would have rolled his optics. "Clever. But my... Decepticons..."

"All have the same safeswitch."

For the first time, something other than anger and confusion broke through to the surface of his mind. The Prime had placed him on the couch, and was hiding - and Megatron could not help but think of it any other way - behind the chair. His frame had failed him, to his great displeasure, and he had no idea when it had happened. "When did you...?"

"When we could. Many of your soldiers were in stasis these last few weeks, remember?"

Whatever nebulous feeling slipped away to be replaced with an old, familiar friend; frustration. It climbed the usual path to self destructive rage, until it collapsed and he found himself laughing. "That explains the cells. Wandering around, asking all those questions - no wonder."

"What?"

"I bet that fool Skyfire is happy. And you..." His words trailed off and he fixed the Prime with a strange, accusatory look. "I suppose I should be flattered."

Although he didn't appreciate the returning insinuations that he and his Autobots were secretly planning to force various Decepticons into interfacing, he at least knew where they were coming from. Bots that had lived while Zeta ruled would hardly forget about him, even millions of years down the road. But Optimus didn't bring him up, only shook his helm. "Whatever happened to being weak, sentimental Autobots?"

"Sentiment for your little Earth pets," he spat, sliding his arm under his chassis to push himself up.

Optimus almost asked how the good doctor was doing, but refrained. He aimed for a less antagonistic path of conversation. "If you force yourself to move before your frame has fully recovered, it - "

"Get slagged," he grunted, arm shaking like a half-rotted empty.

Optimus ran a quick assessment of how the other mech's systems were fairing and grimaced. The
safeswitch's effects were only temporary if left to fade and turn off automatically, but the more the bot tried to fight it, the longer it took. "It will wear off much faster if you just wait."

Megatron said nothing, attention split between the struggle of simply getting his frame to move and exactly where the Prime was. He felt as much as heard the other mech move, the sound of pedesteps leading away from him. He tried to block it out, to push his rapidly draining energy to something productive, but all he could think about were the sounds of metal on metal, a door opening and closing, pedesteps coming back toward him -

The Prime set a cube of energon down on the low table, right within his line of sight. "I thought you might want to look around the apartment without me distracting you."

"Is that your excuse?"

Megatron, as much as he would hate to admit it, had stopped trying to move. The Prime had shuttered his optics, helm titled upwards a little as if awaiting a blessing from Primus.

Or beseeching him. After a moment, he said, "you don't have a curfew, but once you've gone to recharge your door will be locked until you get up."

"What do you think I am, some errant newbuild?"

"I think we both know why I'm not going to give you free run of the apartment during the night cycle."

Already his limbs felt lighter, the stiffness permeating his spinal strut gradually being stripped away by whatever malicious coding's retreat. Or his frame was recovering as the effect faded; he wasn't sure exactly how the frequency affected his frame. "I guess I can't stop you. Yet."

"You can always stay up the entire night cycle, but I will have to stay up with you."

That gave him pause. As much as he had been annoyed with the Prime's disappearing act, the prospect of spending time with him was less than ideal. Having the other hover over him would make figuring out an escape more cumbersome than it needed to be. As he considered the few options open to him, Megatron felt his frame settle into place, back under his own control. He sat up and stretched, but no side-effects lingered within his systems. Fine. If he had the Prime stuck to him until recharge, he was going to mine him for all the information he could. "Where is Soundwave?"

"He's with Blaster. And the cass-"

"And where is the rest of Starscream's trine?"

"He and his trine are with Skyfire."

"You put them all toge- nevermind." Of course whatever they had done to stop Skywarp from teleporting would still be in effect. "I want to know where the stunticons have ended up."

Optimus, who had taken a seat in the overstuffed chair with his own cube, lowered it to sit on his knee with a sigh. "If you want to know where everyone is, I can just give you the run-down."

"Then do it!"

Optimus took another drink, optics fixed on some nebulous point on the wall. Impatience began to bubble up from the pit of his tank and Megatron felt his grip on his own cube tighten - until the Prime set his fuel down. He settled back in the chair, laced his fingers together in his lap, and began talking.
Imperceptibly, Megatron's core temperature began to drop back down. Finally, he could gather some real information beyond cataloging all the useless trinkets stuffed in the apartment.

Optimus didn't mind telling Megatron the whereabouts of his mechs. He would find out the moment he called them on the HUB, anyway, and it was not as if knowing where they were would do anything. They were all living within the same city block, the apartments situated somewhat awkwardly around each other. If was not as if they had spirited them away to parts unknown. Despite the calculating look in his - ward's? - optics that gave him pause, he poured over where everyone was living and with who. Satisfied, or at least unwilling to spend more time listening to Optimus talk, Megatron picked himself up and went to his room, leaving the empty cube behind.

Truthfully, he had left Megatron alone not only to get used to the surroundings but to check in on his own Autobots once more. Optimus had allowed himself the privilege to *occasionally* leave the apartment, but only for short periods of time and only when he could accomplish something necessary. Today was an anomaly, but he thought it had been worth it. Now, however...

The HUB sat silently in the corner of the living room, the crystal encasement offering a blurry reflection of lighting and shadow. He lifted the cube for another drink and found it already drained. Only three minutes had slipped by, but after hearing no sound come from Megatron's room, Optimus placed the cubes in the kitchen and - before he could lose his nerve - locked the door. He half-expected the other to still be awake, to jump to his pedes and rail against the imposition, but nothing happened. He turned the lights off and went to the HUB.

*Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven...*

"Prime? Is everything okay?"

"Hello, Red Alert. Yes, everything is fine."

His security expert's gaze darted around him, over his shoulders and helm to the room beyond. "Is there something you need? Should I call Ratchet or - or someone?" He could hear the tell-tale click of him working on something, but couldn't guess what it would be on, since Red Alert now gave his reports to Ironhide.

But nothing was stopping him from checking in or asking for updates, was there? "No, that won't be necessary. I only wanted to ask... does Cosmos have anything to report?"

"Oh! Right. Cosmos, Cosmos..." He must have pulled something up on one of his other monitors, as he briefly turned and tipped out of frame. "No, but he's only sent messages while still circling Cybertron over the past few weeks. Omega Supreme is still scheduled to leave within the orbital cycle, and then Cosmos will start his deep space dives."

"Thank you, Red Alert. If there is anything new, would you mind contacting me? As soon as it's appropriate, of course."

"Of course, Prime. Is there anything else? Any - did everything go alright today?"

"Yes. I expect once he's had time to process everything, he'll start trying to find a way out in earnest. But I'm confident he won't."

After a moment, the other bot nodded, a look of shared confidence blooming over his face. "Right. If there's nothing else, I'll let you get to recharge?"
"Thank you again, Red. Good night." With one last look around his Prime, Red Alert returned his good bye and the HUB went dark. Optimus found the moment of complete stillness and silence immensely comforting. The human advice of "take a deep breath" came to mind, despite his kind’s lack of need for it. They had survived the first day, which meant it was possible they could survive the second, and third, and so on until something good happened. In fact, the day had gone better than he had expected, and it was with this thought that Optimus finally settled down in his berth and surrendered to recharge.

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