Crimson Flowers
by KaidaShade

Summary

Knock Out has spent his whole life as a slave, passed from one owner to another and hearing stories of the savage, brutal bots that live beyond the city walls. He never imagined that he would meet one, but after a near-fatal attack he finds himself stranded alone among a tribe of the barbarians. His survival depends on learning their ways, and understanding what the huge, hulking bot caring for him wants from him.

What he discovers could change more than just his life, it could change their whole world.

Notes

Alright, here we go. I've been working on this bad boy for nearly two years now, and I'm finally confident enough that I can finish it to start posting it. I'm going to try and get up one chapter a week, probably on Saturdays.

HEED THE TAGS- The first couple of paragraphs are noncon, but after that there isn't any explicitly on-screen until much, much later, but it's mentioned a lot.

Special thanks to Alisette for betaing and lovingly applying the Boot of Motivation to my ass when I needed to write, especially during NaNoWriMo last year, for which this was my novel.
Chapter 1

“Come now, pet, for the price I paid for you I expect a little more- hn- enthusiasm”

Knock Out let his eyes slide shut and leaned back a little in his master’s lap, his vents stuttering and his delicate claws gripping the seat. He might, he thought to himself, have shown a little more enthusiasm if his master had any sexual ability at all. He did not say this, of course, because the bot in question was easily twice his size and his life depended upon his master’s whim. Instead, he moaned as convincingly as he could and rocked his hips down on the thick spike inside him, calipers squeezing around it despite the jolt of pain that accompanied a poorly-timed thrust from below him. The sound he made at that was decidedly real, a gasp of pain that was willfully misinterpreted as a signal to continue, to wring more whimpers from his mouth as rough hands gripped his hips and dragged him further down the shaft.

“Better. Much better. Maybe I won't throw you out for the savages after all,” his master’s voice crooned, slurred with lust, and Knock Out turned his head away and tried to focus on something else. He felt sorry for their transport, having all this going on inside her while traversing the rough, scrubby plains between their home city of Tarn and his master’s ambassadorial home in Kaon. It irked him that he couldn't see out of the window from his unpleasant seat; the first half of the journey had almost been pleasant with the view, until his master had gotten bored of reading and pulled him into his lap. Now all he wanted to look at was the inside of his eyelids, it was infinitely preferable to the rusted old wreck currently pawing at his gleaming crimson paintwork.

Fortunately, his master was as lacking in stamina as he was in every other way, and Knock Out didn’t have to endure for long before he gave one final thrust and spilled inside him, making his plating shudder. He hoped his disgust would be mistaken for pleasure, or he might just find himself thrown out for the barbarians who inhabited the plains after all. One heard stories about their savagery, kidnappings and rape and even sacrificing bots to their heathen gods. His master was bad enough, he thought as he was pushed off of the softening spike, back into his own seat where he squeezed his thighs together to try and avoid making a mess on the transport’s seats; he could only imagine how much more cruel and brutal the wild bots would be. But they hadn’t seen any sign of them since they'd left Tarn, nor anyone else on the road. Just a few wandering animals and, a few hours ago, some kind of large avian circling in the distance. Hopefully it would stay that way.

Knock Out drew his legs in a little, trying to ignore the ache in his valve and the aborted click of the cover he no longer possessed trying to close. What use did a creature like him have for dignity or modesty after all? He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment to chase that thought away and then resolutely stared out of the window, watching the plains roll by. They were beautiful in a strange way, bronze and gold and verdigris grasses gleaming in the sunlight, dotted here and there with brighter flowers in chromium oranges and blues and vivid manganese purple. Very different from his own, often praised beauty in crimson and crisp white detailing. His master had recently decided to have him decorated with gold, and while it looked very pleasing on his wheels he wasn't so sure about the garish bands on his helm crest or the fine detail around his eyes, bright and shimmering in contrast with the black and red of his optics. The thick collar around his neck had also been gilded to
match, not that it made it any more comfortable. No, there was nothing of the natural, subtle hues that dominated out here about him.

The avian was back, he noticed dimly. Or perhaps it was a different one, circling close enough for him to see the broad sweep of its wings and the long neck and tail that marked it as an animal and not a jet alt. Wait… he frowned slightly, leaning closer to the window to see it better as it came back around above them. No avian he’d ever seen had a tail like that, or the clawed, membranous wings that held this one aloft. That were, in fact, angling towards them.

The beast dived.

Knock Out barely had a chance to shout a warning before everything was thrown sideways, a massive talon smashing through the window where he had been moments before. He landed hard against his master and was thrown off, sent tumbling as the transport transformed around them and swept his master up in her arms, unholstering the enormous rifle she carried in case of attack. Knock Out hit the ground hard and wheezed as something sharp pierced his plating, pain lancing through him, and above him came the sounds of shots fired and the shriek of the beast as it dived again. He was disorientated enough that he barely managed to roll out of the way of one of the transport’s feet as she staggered back, grappling with their attacker. The movement dragged a cry of pain from his throat as whatever had pierced his armour was driven deeper, and he could do nothing but curl up and hope he wouldn’t be stepped on. He didn’t know how badly hurt he was, but his fingers came away gleaming blue and swam before his eyes when he touched the wound and he knew enough to know that wasn’t good.

The monster landed close enough to shake the ground and roared, and its call was answered by other cries, more familiar. Rescue? This far out? No, he realised as the sounds resolved into voices, a language he didn’t recognise. Nothing so fortunate. He was still bleeding and a sudden flare of dust forced him to shield his eyes, then the world around him exploded into a chaotic cacophony of shouting and engines and animal roars, the clash of metal and the awful flapping of wings. For a brief moment he thought he heard his master shouting, but then his voice and the shadow of the transport were gone, the sounds of something huge transforming and a massive engine roaring left in their wake. He tried to uncurl, but pain ripped through his upper body and he only managed to whimper.

He didn’t know how long he laid there, but eventually the beast roared its fury and the sound of wings retreated into the distance amid a ragged cheer. Knock Out did his best to hold still, hoping that perhaps these barbarians- what else could they be, out here?- would leave him alone if they thought he was dead. A few more minutes, and it probably wouldn’t matter. He could see the glow of the puddle of energon around him even with his eyes closed and the throb of pain was insistent, all-encompassing. A shadow fell over him and he couldn’t even summon the strength to lift his head, let alone run or try to fight them off. The last thing he knew before he went offline was a pair of rough hands on him, rolling him onto his back, and he hoped he’d be dead before they got a chance to do anything else to him.
Breakdown had never been this close to a city bot before. Even as his strong, sure hands worked to try and stop the energon oozing from around the scrubby tree that had pierced his thin plating, he marvelled at the gleam of his paint and the biolights that flickered on his frame. He snapped himself out of it when one of his comrades called to him, insistent that they leave before the Predacon returned.

“Hang on a sec, I gotta stop this bleed before we can move.” He called back. He couldn't remove the branch just yet, not without making everything worse, but he could at least make sure his patient didn't bleed out. The salve Ratchet had given him seemed to work, the biolights on the wounded bot’s back steadying in their glow as the energon coagulated around the wound, rather than going out. A good sign. He sat back on his heels and looked round as Bulkhead’s heavy footsteps approached from behind him, the green bot flicking dirt from his wrecking ball before transforming it back into a hand. He peered over Breakdown’s shoulder, curious, and Breakdown nudged him away. “Slag, they left their friend behind,” Bulkhead remarked, “Think he'll make it?”

“Maybe, if I can get him back to Ratchet in time. He needs a real medic.”

“You're a-”

“I'm just his assistant. Doesn't matter. Is anyone else hurt?”

Bulkhead shook his head, then stepped back as Breakdown carefully gathered the little city bot up in his arms. He was so light, built for speed rather than strength perhaps, and carrying him wasn't difficult. “We got lucky. Predaking didn't seem to wanna fight all that much. Guess he knows he's outside his territory here.”

“Bulkhead! Breakdown! Let's go already! We can rumble our engines at each other later!” Another voice called to them, Wheeljack’s white arm waving to get their attention. Arcee had already climbed up to the top of an outcropping nearby, her winglets twitching as she watched the sky.

“Alright alright, we’re coming.”
Normally, the return trip to their camp would take an hour or two of driving, but with Breakdown encumbered it took them most of the afternoon to get back. Arcee and Wheeljack, faster and more agile, scouted ahead while Bulkhead stayed back with him, ready to defend. The city bot was quiet in his arms, still offline with his biolights dim and his eyes closed, but alive and not leaking anywhere he could see. He was warm, his plating smooth and only a little scuffed from the attack, and a couple of times he caught himself lightly stroking him. No, he told himself, that was weird. This wasn't like taking an intended mate, the city bot wouldn't understand and he couldn't exactly woo him if he was unconscious anyway.

He'd managed to push the idea out of his head by the time they returned to the camp. The sun was setting and the soft glow of the campfires was a welcoming sight in the half-light. They were immediately waylaid by the clan's medic, the grumpy old bot chiding them for taking so long and making him worry, though his bulky shoulders relaxed a bit when the only casualty was revealed to be a stranger. He ushered Breakdown into his tent, the warm glow of lamps and the scent of herbs welcoming and reassuring. The city bot was still unconscious, and Ratchet frowned deeply at his wound as he examined him.

"You did well with this, but he's lost a lot of fuel and we need to replace that as soon as possible, probably before we try and remove this and make him bleed again. Why don't you tell me what happened while I work?"

Breakdown nodded, frowning a little. "Will he be alright?"

"Hard to say for sure how much damage has been done on the inside. Tell me what happened." Ratchet repeated, shuffling off to hunt through his stores for a container of liquid energon, then returned to his patient to carefully pour it down his intake.

Breakdown closed his eyes and recounted the tale, how they had been on patrol and seen Predaking circling in the distance, well outside his usual hunting grounds. How they'd seen him dive, and run to confront him only to find him fighting a massive city bot. How they'd sent him running and turned to prepare to confront the city bot, only to find that she and the smaller bot she'd been protecting had bolted, leaving this one behind. Ratchet was quiet, listening but focused on getting fuel into his patient. "Strange that one would be protected and not the other. Especially someone like this."

"What d'you mean?" he looked down at the prone body, avoiding touching him while Ratchet was examining the wound again.

"Well, look at him. All this gold, and the grooming. There's not a scratch on him apart from the obvious. Probably someone important, or the offspring of someone important. Certainly not someone who does hard work or even goes outside every day."

"A priest, maybe?"

"Who knows? I've never seen a city priest, but if he is one maybe it would be best to leave him to his fate. I've heard stories about what they do to please their so-called gods." Ratchet's plating flared
up and he shuddered, then shook his head and continued with what he was doing. He was a bot of healing, he wouldn't let someone die on his watch whoever they were.

Breakdown didn't respond, just found a place out of the way until Ratchet ordered him to come over and help, getting his big fingers in to pinch torn lines while the branch was carefully removed. He thought he saw the city bot flinch, but it had to be an illusion. Nobody would be able to hold still through that without screaming if they were online. With the application of more of the coagulation salve and some careful sealing of lines, Ratchet stood up and stretched his back struts out with a faint creaking of joints.

“Right. He's not going to die straight away, at least. If he makes it, we can take him and drop him off near his home before his friends start trying to look for him,” he said, “Get some more fuel into him, I think I need to warn Optimus about our guest in case trouble comes calling.”

“Wait, alone?” He stood a little straighter, a worried little frown on his face.

“You're capable. I should know, I've been training you.” Ratchet quirked a brow ridge, challenging him to argue with his experience, and he lowered his head.

“Then… yes. Thank you Ratchet, I won't let you down.”

“Good. Go on. Fuel, for him and for you, and come fetch me if he wakes me up. Otherwise, I’ll leave his care in your capable hands.”

“Yes, Ratchet.”

He waited for the old medic to leave before he set to finding fuel. His own container ended up on a table, half forgotten, as he gently tilted the city bot’s head back to open his intake and carefully dribbled it in, making sure it would go down his throat. At least he seemed alive enough to swallow on reflex, and slowly some of the brightness seemed to return to his biolights as his tanks filled. Even once the cube was empty he couldn’t quite pull his eyes away from that pale, elegant face, the little touches of gold highlighting the eyes and the crimson framing it. Sure, there were bots among his tribe with bright colours and bold markings, but they were almost all scarred from battle and the rough life of the plains, even the youngest of them had a few scuffs and scrapes. But this bot was strangely, fascinatingly glossy and he found himself with his hand hovering over one arched shoulder guard, resisting the urge to touch.

Which, of course, was when the city bot opened his eyes.

He went from prone and limp to scrambling away in moments, tumbling from the table he’d been laid on and hitting the ground with a clatter and a yelp. Breakdown jerked away in surprise, then leaned over to see him and winced when he saw him sprawled on the floor, clutching his injured side and gritting his teeth, red-on-black eyes squinted in pain but still locked onto him. His other hand tried to grip the floor, sharp fingertips scraping the rust-speckled metal, but his claws weren’t strong enough to find purchase.
Breakdown hopped down from the table and came around it, his hands held up in an attempt to show he wasn’t armed, but the city bot lashed out with his foot and hauled himself away, backing himself up into the corner with his injured side pressed to the flimsy tent wall and his legs drawn up, ready to strike if he came too close. Breakdown didn’t blame him; he was a large, intimidating warrior even to his own kind, and the city bot was so much smaller, his armour much thinner. He crouched down, offering a hand. “Easy, it’s alright. I won’t hurt you.” He tried to soothe, but the city bot just curled up tighter, cringing away from him. He didn’t understand a word, he realised, and when he tried to get closer he whimpered something in a language Breakdown had never heard before, his voice rich and lovely but thick with panic. He backed off, then got up and backed off several more steps, keeping his hands where they could be seen. Unthreatening, or so he hoped. It seemed all he could do was wait.
Knock Out had never been so afraid in his entire life. Apparently wherever he was, Primus wasn't listening to his pleas and he hadn't died. No, instead, he had come back online to a faint warmth under his back wheels and the soft rumble of an engine at rest nearby. At first he had hoped that meant he was back in his master’s house, recovering, but then he had opened his eyes and found himself confronted with a massive, blue brute about to touch his headlight.

Shouting and throwing himself away from the barbarian had seemed totally reasonable until he'd hit the ground. Even then, the pain lancing through his body from the wound was better than the awful crawling sensation on his plating from the near-touch. He had no idea what the barbarian wanted from him, but it couldn't be good. When he moved, Knock Out jammed himself into the nearest corner to protect his injury and tried to make himself as small and unappealing as he could. The wall was soft, some kind of fabric rather than anything actually protective, but it at least gave the illusion of cover. He was painfully aware of his exposed, vulnerable array, and drawing his legs up was a poor compensation.

Every little sound of movement made him flinch, anticipating the inevitable attack. It had to be inevitable, that was what these barbarians did, right? They were savages, surely their self control wouldn't hold up when he was so tempting even to the civilised city folk he was accustomed to. Another shift, and the brute said something that Knock Out had no chance of understanding. A demand? It didn't sound like a question. One more shuffle, closer, and it was just too much. “No, please!” He screwed his eyes shut and hated the whimper in his voice. Pleading was pathetic, he'd learned the hard way that half the time it only encouraged his masters, but he just couldn't help himself.

Miraculously, the sounds retreated. He dared to peek out over his own pauldron after a minute or so to see the brute standing on the other side of the room, patiently watching him with solid amber eyes. That… that didn't make sense. Why had he retreated? Oh, he still had him cornered, but he hadn't attacked. It had to be some kind of trick, Knock Out decided. Making him relax so he'd be an easier target. He wouldn't be fooled, oh no. He could be patient too. He kept his eyes on the barbarian, his mind racing as he tried to come up with a way to escape. The fabric at his back was thick and heavy, but his claws were sharp and he suspected he might be able to slash through it if he tried. But it would take too long to make a big enough hole and the beast would be upon him. Not to mention that there was probably an entire horde of them out there if the sounds from beyond were any indication. No, better to handle one barbarian than perhaps dozens.
The barbarian still hadn’t moved. If he had to guess, he'd almost think the brute looked worried. But that was stupid; what threat was he to someone so much larger, and why would he be concerned for him? Maybe he was just some kind of guard, keeping him for someone else? Knock Out could barely stand the uncertainty, the anticipation. Maybe it would be better to get it over with. To offer himself and hope that the brute would be gentle, unlikely as it might be. It had worked before, it never hurt as much if he didn't fight.

He vented hard and slowly shifted his hips, mustering his courage, and he spread his thighs to expose his valve. His teeth caught his lip and he averted his eyes. Better not to see it coming, and it looked good and submissive, unthreatening. The barbarian moved and Knock Out braced himself, but to his shock he backed away again, shaking his head at him. He looked up and saw that the barbarian’s eyes were locked firmly on the floor, though their glow had brightened in what Knock Out recognised as lust. “No?” He said, the word slipping out too-high and tremulous, disbelieving.

The barbarian said something back, still not looking at him, and brought his hands up and together in a closing gesture, which he repeated a couple of times until Knock Out got the message and squeezed his thighs back together. He relaxed visibly when he did, shook his head at him again, and patted a spot on his chassis equivalent to where Knock Out had been injured.

Oh. Not while he was hurt? He supposed it made sense; they’d fixed him up, it wouldn't do to knock something out of place. And it wasn't like he could leave. Even if he wasn't guarded, he couldn't transform with the crudely-patched hole in his plating and he'd just get lost in the wilds and starve, or be prey for some hungry creature, even if he did get away. And really, what waited for him if he did make it back to Kaon? Just his master, just being someone's plaything until they tired of him and sold him on again. Here or there, did it matter who was fragging him?

He curled up again and hid his face, the plates on his shoulders shivering as he forced himself to vent evenly. Maybe if the brute left, he'd allow himself a private moment of misery, but this wasn't the time. He heard footsteps approaching again, almost tentative, and held perfectly still until they stopped. The barbarian crouched in front of him, in arm's reach but making no attempt to touch him, and he dared to look up at him after a moment or two. He was huge; intimidating with his big, heavy hands and thick, scratched armour, but there was a tentative smile on his face and when he spoke his voice seemed gentler beneath the gravelly, growling tones of the words. Knock Out eyed him for a moment, then slowly reached up to grab the fabric wall and pull himself up with his good arm, which was awkward and painful but made him feel a little less trapped. The barbarian watched him but stayed crouched on the ground. Even then, his head reached Knock Out’s headlights when he finally stood straight on shaky legs. He suspected if he let go of the wall he’d fall straight on top of him and that was the last thing he wanted. Honestly, he wasn't entirely sure where he was even going with this standing up business.

Fortunately—or unfortunately perhaps— he was saved from deciding by the arrival of a new bot. The tent flap was pushed aside, admitting a white and orange bot who blinked in surprise at him, then looked down at the barbarian on the floor. He apparently didn’t even need to speak to express his confusion, the blue barbarian launching into—presumably—some kind of explanation which—
presumably made sense to the newcomer. At least, the newcomer nodded along to it, and then turned his piercing blue eyes on Knock Out. He shrank back a little, pressed to the fabric wall but still on his feet. It felt like that bot could see straight through him, right down to his spark, which was thrumming in its casing. The newcomer considered him, then said something that sounded like a question. Knock Out’s blank look was apparently all the answer he needed; he defaulted to pointing, first at Knock Out, then at his wound specifically, then at the berth off to the side where he had woken up. When he hesitated, he repeated the gesture, a little more insistently.

Disobeying had never turned out well for him, and he carefully shuffled back towards the berth, his legs trembling under him until he was able to sit and take the weight off of them. It felt as though he’d driven a rally, and he didn’t know if it was fear or just plain exhaustion making him ache like he did. The new bot approached him and he stiffened, his plating flaring up before he forced it to flatten down, submissive. He was nowhere near as big as the blue bot, but he was broad-shouldered and his entire demeanour suggested he would take no nonsense from anyone. The faded-out medic colours only added to the effect, though whether he was actually a medic he had no idea.

The maybe-medic seemed to have no compunctions about touching him, and his spark stuttered when he planted a hand on his chest and pushed him down onto his back with a single, short word that he couldn’t understand. Knock Out stayed there, tensed up when the blue bot got to his feet, but he kept his distance as the two barbarians conversed with each other and that helped him to slowly relax. He even dared to roll over off his back wheels, which was more comfortable for him, and the orange and white bot glanced over and nodded his approval at him. Alright, so apparently he was to stay here. That was fine. All he wanted to do was be left alone to recharge right now, to recover from his injury so that maybe he could at least try to defend himself if need be. Right now, he couldn’t fight off a lightning bug.

The maybe-medic seemed to understand, and he disappeared behind him somewhere and returned a moment later with a rough-cut cube of energon, which he left on the berth by Knock Out’s head. He then backed off, and gestured to the blue bot to follow him with a few words. They both left the tent, leaving him alone.

The fuel went down so quickly he almost didn’t taste it, but enough touched his tongue for him to note how sweet it tasted. It was barely comparable to the low-grade he was used to in the city, and he found himself trying to lick the dregs from the inside of the container before he released how stupid that was and set it aside. It did make him feel a little better at least. He was alone, in an unfamiliar place surrounded by bots who might want to kill him, or worse, but two of them had shown him something like kindness. Maybe he could at least rest for a little while unmolested…
Breakdown found himself sent back to his own tent once he was done relaying to Ratchet what had happened. He caught himself leaving out the part where the city bot had exposed himself to him, though he wasn't sure why. Ratchet was severe and grumpy but he was almost impossible to fluster-unless you were a very particular bot- and surely he should know in case the lovely crimson creature tried something like that again.

But just the thought of it made Breakdown's engine rumble and his fans kick up a notch, and he hid his face in the blankets to try and push the image from his mind. Under other circumstances he would have tackled any bot who showed such eagerness. But... it hadn't been eagerness, had it? The city bot had been terrified of him, and even that inviting display had been accompanied by a flinch and trembling hands. His behaviour didn't make sense, certainly not for a noble or priest. He would have expected demands, a show of dominance, not submissive cowering and... whatever that was.

It bothered him, and it bothered him more that he couldn't get it out of his head, that his body reacted so positively to it. He growled at himself as he had to force interface protocols offline for the third time that night, tried to ignore the heat pooling determinedly in his array, and closed his eyes. “Go to sleep,” he muttered at himself irritably. It didn't work. Nor did it work for a good hour longer until he finally rolled over with a grunt of frustration and got up to go for a walk. He wasn't going to give in to this. He wasn't going to get off to a scared stranger, that was fragged up, even if he couldn't stop thinking about it. He’d looked away as soon as he’d realised what he was seeing, but it was enough to catch a flash of gold, biolights in places he didn’t even know you could have.

The night air was cooler than within the tent, though it was just as still. This late, there were few other bots around aside from a few guards keeping watch by the light of glowing crystals. They nodded to him as he passed, but didn’t question his wandering. The familiar sounds of a slumbering camp were soothing to him; the rustling and shuffling of their animals, the distant calls of turbofoxes out in the plains, familiar ventilations and engine rumbles as he passed tents belonging to friends. It didn’t get the red bot out of his mind entirely, but he managed to push him to the back of his thoughts, and soon he found his feet dragging and his optics flickering just a little from tiredness. He took it as a sign to return to his berth, and mercifully he managed to fall offline moments after hitting the blankets.
The sun woke him, filtering gently through the tent fabric, and much as he wanted to immediately charge off to Ratchet's tent he made himself remain calm. He doubted the city bot would appreciate being woken if he'd slept at all, and he took the time to wipe himself off with a cloth and solvent after all the dust and dirt of driving yesterday. His blue and grey paint was dinged and scuffed all over but he'd never really paid an awful lot of attention to that; few of them did, aside from Starscream when he was around and the twins when they found the time. He focused on being clean, rather than worrying over details.

The camp was already busy when he emerged, a couple of small, young bots darting past as he left the tent, one calling a greeting before he transformed and shot off into the sky, much to the fury of his grounder friends. Breakdown chuckled to himself and carried on, joining a group tapping fresh energon from a batch of crystals that had been refining overnight. The crystals that grew here were excellent, drawing from the mineral rich soil of the plains and flavouring the resulting fuel perfectly, at least in his opinion. Sure, he'd drink anything he was offered, but he enjoyed this so much more.

He hung around a little while, listening to the camp gossip while he fuelled up, then once he was done he obtained a second container for the city bot. Healing from an injury like that was bound to up his fuel demand, and perhaps it would help to make him less afraid. The thought made him smile, though it did falter a little when he paused outside Ratchet's tent. Should he give some kind of warning before he came in? Call out?

Ratchet would probably appreciate the warning at least and he called the old medic’s name. He waited a few moments, but there was no reply, only a quiet scrape of metal on metal. After a few moments more he dared to poke his head inside. No sign of the distinctive white and orange frame, just a pair of red eyes glowing at him in the tent’s dim interior, wide and unblinking. As his optics adjusted the rest of the city bot’s frame became visible, sat up on the berth with a blanket rumpled up around his hips. He held still for a moment, hoping the city bot wouldn't throw himself off the berth trying to get away again, then slowly brought his hands into view with the softly glowing energon held in them. “Fuel?” he offered. Sure, he didn't understand, but Breakdown hoped maybe he could teach him some words.

The eyes flickered downwards briefly before returning to his face, apparently reluctant to let down his guard. Breakdown let himself inside, holding out the container like an offering, or perhaps like he was trying to coax a frightened animal. The city bot watched warily, gripping the blanket like a shield until Breakdown stopped with the cube held just within grabbing range. He eyed it, then slowly began to reach up for it with delicately clawed hands. He seemed so cautious about just this little thing, as though he expected a trick, to be grabbed or have the fuel snatched away, and it made Breakdown's spark ache a little.

He should have been paying more attention. The city bot jerked forward and grabbed the fuel so quickly he nearly clawed Breakdown's fingers, startling him into stepping back. He flinched as well, but still managed to gulp down the fuel so fast Breakdown was surprised he didn't purge his tanks from it. He curled up a little as he realised what he'd done and Breakdown held up his hands, backing up another step. The last thing he wanted was for him to be afraid, and the lack of hostility
on his part seemed to help just a little. The city bot’s grip on the container loosened at least, with an audible creak from the strained material. He still looked like he was expecting an attack and his eyes tracked every little movement Breakdown made. Breakdown, however, let his eyes slide to his wounded side, which he noted had been turned away from him, the door on the city bot’s arm held carefully over it. They would need to check on that, he thought. Where was Ratchet?

As if the thought had summoned him, the old medic pushed aside the curtain of the back entrance, rubbing dull eyes with one hand. Still half asleep, probably. “You're early,” he remarked, his voice kept low and gentle to avoid spooking their patient. He still seemed a little spooked, tensing up and trying to keep both of them in view at once. It made Breakdown feel a little better that he apparently considered Ratchet more of a threat, more of his focus on the medic. At least until he spoke, then those bright scarlet eyes were back on him.

“Yeah. Woke up early, figured I'd bring some fuel for our guest.”

“And none for me I see.” Ratchet huffed, though there was a tiny smile to his mouth that suggested teasing. “No no, I see how it is, I'll get my own. You can see how that patch is doing.”

“What? But-”

“You're capable. Better not to crowd him, anyway.”

With that, Ratchet ducked back through the curtain, leaving Breakdown alone with a wary bot he couldn't communicate with, and a job to do. The city bot’s eyes were back on him, and he dithered for a moment before speaking. Introductions, maybe? He couldn't just keep thinking of him as ‘the city bot’. After a moment's consideration, he placed his hand on his chest and slowly and clearly said “Breakdown,” before gesturing to the other bot and cocking his head inquisitively.

The city bot frowned at him, confused, but realisation dawned quickly and he pointed at him. “Breakdown?” when Breakdown nodded, he touched his own chest and added “Knock Out.”

His voice was lovely and Breakdown couldn't help but smile and repeat the name. Knock Out. At least he knew what to call him now. It seemed to help a little that he'd bothered to introduce himself; Knock Out managed a wary smile of his own, though it vanished when Breakdown took a step towards him. Right, he still didn't know what he wanted. That required a little more thought to mime.

He pointed to his eyes, then to Knock Out, then touched his side around where the injury was on the other bot and finished with that same questioning head gesture. It took a little longer for Knock Out to seem to understand what he was asking, and even then he didn't seem happy about letting him close. But he did slowly nod, shifting on the berth to reveal the foil patch Ratchet had stuck over the top of the wound.
Breakdown approached slowly, holding his hands where they could be seen. Knock Out didn't take his eyes off him, but he held still and shifted onto his back to let Breakdown at the wound. He was as gentle as he could be as he peeled the patch away, but Knock Out still flinched when he touched it. He crouched to make himself less intimidating and had to resist the urge to try to pet him and soothe him; he wasn't an animal to be tamed, even if he felt a bit like a beast handler with the low, quiet way he spoke to him.

He explained what he was doing and why as he peeled back the patch and set up a glowing crystal near the wound so that he could see the sealant-caked lines within. It was obvious that Knock Out didn't understand a word, but he watched him with a little less fear even when he had his fingers inside him, checking that there was no leaking or any damage they'd missed the night before in the urgency of stabilising him. A burst of static and a hiss of vents made him withdraw a little with a quiet apology, not wanting to hurt him. “I'm sorry, I know it hurts to touch. I'll be done soon.”

Knock Out frowned a little, not understanding, and Breakdown returned to his work and tucked a couple of cables back into their proper places before he withdrew his hands and carefully stuck the patch back over. He smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way. “There, all done,” he said, then backed up a little with his hands raised. Knock Out relaxed a little more when he was out of arms’ reach, and he touched his fingers to the patch. He said something that Breakdown didn't understand, but the little nervous smile it was accompanied by implied thanks of some kind. It changed his whole face when he smiled, transforming something that was just pretty before into a visage that made his knees go a bit weak. He was absolutely gorgeous, and Breakdown had to give himself a good mental shake to force himself to stop staring.

“You're welcome,” he replied, “Do you need… wait, you can't understand. Never mind. Really gotta figure that one out…” but who here would know both languages? Starscream maybe, but who knew when he'd be back, when he'd found out this morning that the elegant Seeker had been carried off again a couple of days before?

Knock Out just looked confused all over again, and Breakdown sighed a little. Luckily he was spared from having to make awkward small talk with someone who didn't understand a word by Ratchet’s return. He had a container of energon in his hand and seemed surprised to see them so close. “Well frag, seems like you're getting on great with him.”

Knock Out flinched and Breakdown sighed softly, put himself between him and Ratchet. “Sorta. He's still scared and he doesn't understand a word we say but I got his name at least.” “He let you check his wound?” “Yeah. Seems to be healing well, no rust or corrosion or leaking or anything.” “Good. I'll trust your judgement for now, best not to have too many people poking him about at this point. We’ll have to try and teach him a few words, enough that he can understand what's going on.” “I was gonna get Starscream involved, but he's gotten kidnapped again.” “Oh, right. Well, he’ll be back in a few days when he gets tired of being courted, knowing him. Until then we’ll just have to make do.” Ratchet sighed, scratching at the side of the chevron on his forehead.

Breakdown glanced around at Knock Out, who was still watching the medic like a chromehawk.
‘Making do’ might be about the best they could manage.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your lovely comments! This is going to be a long haul but I'm already delighted with the response I've gotten.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Knock Out learns more about the tribe

Perhaps, Knock Out considered once the two barbarians left him alone again, the big one wasn’t quite such a brute after all. No, his name was Breakdown, he reminded himself; he’d actually bothered to take the time to introduce himself. He’d tended to his injury so carefully, those big hands restraining all of their strength to avoid hurting him. Not, he considered, the actions of some barbaric creature only interested in claiming him.

But it also went against everything he’d ever heard about the tribes. What if it was all some ploy to get him to lower his guard? But then again, when would he ever be more vulnerable and weak than this? He lay on the berth for a while, letting such thoughts chase each other around his processor, then let his restlessness get the better of him and sat up with a frustrated sigh. Even just doing that upset his gyro and he swayed a little, closing his eyes to fight off the dizziness and pings of pain from his side. He needed to move, he thought. Not necessarily to escape, but he was going to drive himself insane just lying here. The sounds of outside filtered through the tent’s walls, though they were thick enough to muffle them well, and he had to know what was going on.

His masters had always complained about his inquisitive nature, he thought as he forced himself to his feet, holding onto the berth until he found his balance. It hurt, but he felt a little better just being up and able to defend himself, if only in the most pathetic way. Once he was sure the ground had stopped swaying beneath his feet, he gingerly headed for the tent flap. He’d just peek out, just for a moment, just enough to prepare himself for whatever horrors they might inflict on him.

The sun overhead was fierce and after the dimness of the tent he had to reset his optics a few times before he could see anything at all, and he listened intently the whole time for any sign that he’d been spotted or of danger. The dusty silver shapes of tents eventually came into focus around him, clustered around a central space containing several fire pits. A couple of those had strange contraptions set up near them, which were being carefully monitored by members of the tribe. Others sat nearby, doing little jobs and talking in their strange, gruff language. It seemed more like engine sounds and grinding gears at times, though it didn't scare him as much as it had, and he was able to pick out the light hearted tone of their speech, a few laughs interspersed with the words.

Something darted by and he shrunk back behind the tent flap, though his curiosity was roused again by excited barking and he peered back out to see a tiny little bot chasing some kind of animal he'd never seen before. It looked like the little turbofoxes one of his masters had kept as pets, but easily ten times the size, with claws like knives and vicious teeth. But it seemed almost cautious as the tiny bot tackled it and they went rolling around together, the small one laughing as the creature batted at it gently with a paw and rumbled its motors.
One of the other barbarians looked up at the commotion and called out, a warning tone in her voice, and the small bot gently disengaged from the beast and flopped down on his aft to let it lick his face. Was he a minicon? Knock Out had seen those before, albeit fleetingly, but they were usually stockier and this one looked like he had some kind of flying alt that didn’t fit his small stature.

The one who had called out looked up then, and Knock Out felt his spark freeze as she met his eyes. Her own eyes widened in surprise for a moment, and then she smiled at him and said something to her neighbour, who looked up too. He ducked back out of sight, fuel pump pounding and making him dizzy all over again. They seemed peaceful, but who knew if that would last, if he was really safe in here, even? Surely there had to be a reason for the brutal reputation of the tribal folk?

He carefully limped back to the berth with more questions than he’d had to start with. If only he could understand, he could maybe ask Breakdown. He knew trusting the first bot he’d seen here wasn’t the brightest idea, but the big bot had been nothing but gentle with him so far, had even turned him down when he’d offered himself. He didn’t think anyone had ever done that before. He seemed to be some kind of medic, were they forbidden such pleasures perhaps? The priests were, back home, and it wasn’t unreasonable to assume that healing might be seen as holy by these people. Or maybe he’d never done it before and he didn’t want to let his first time be with a glorified toy like him.

A noise close to the outside of the tent made him freeze in place, laying on his good side but turned in such a way that he could see the door. The tent flap ruffled in a passing breeze, but nobody came inside. He sighed through his vents in relief and let his head rest on his arm. Being so wound up all the time could not be good for him, he hadn’t been this twitchy since that one master who’d liked touching him in his recharge so much…

That thought was interrupted by another rustle, except this time a now-familiar blue and grey bot let himself inside, illuminated by the glow of an energon container. Knock Out managed to refrain from flinching away from him, even greeted him with a smile. “Good to see you’re back. You’re almost not scary anymore.” He remarked, though his thighs clenched together under the blankets on instinct and his voice wasn’t as confident as he would have liked. Breakdown cocked his head at him, obviously not understanding, but he smiled anyway and offered him the fuel. He steeled himself not to snatch it; the big bot hadn’t hurt him, hadn’t even tried, and if he didn’t antagonise him hopefully that wouldn’t change. The energon out here was still so wonderfully sweet, and it was almost enough to distract him from Breakdown’s eyes on him.

He took his time drinking, savouring the delicious energon now that his tanks weren’t sending him warnings every few minutes as they had when he’d first awoken. His master hadn’t been particularly concerned with feeding him anything but his spike when they’d been on the road, and he’d long been trained not to complain. But now, he was genuinely grateful for the fuel and he managed a sincere “Thank you,” hoping that the tone would get the message across. Breakdown seemed to understand, and his grin was downright infectious as he replied. For a big barbarian brute,
he was strangely endearing, and for a moment Knock Out found himself smiling back at him, until their eyes met and he looked down again sharply.

Breakdown cleared his throat and he glanced back up, watched as the big bot pointed at him, then to the tent flap, ending with that questioning head-tilt he’d come to understand. He spoke slowly as he did so, asking a question. Did he want to know if he’d been out? If he wanted to? Hard to say. He was curious about his captors, and if Breakdown was offering him a chance to see… he took the risk and nodded.

Breakdown approached him slowly, keeping his hands where Knock Out could see, and he carefully offered him one once he was close enough. When Knock Out didn’t respond right away he beckoned to him, saying something that was obviously supposed to be encouraging. He had to steel himself to take that hand and let Breakdown help him off the berth, and his spark stuttered when his legs wobbled and he ended up leaning on the big bot. It didn’t seem to bother him though, and he waited until Knock Out had his balance before sliding his arm around his shoulders.

Knock Out froze instantly. The sun-warmed metal around his shoulders felt like a vice, cutting off his vents. He couldn’t shove him off, couldn’t lash out, even when every instinct demanded he do. It would only make things worse if he tried to resist. Experience told him that.

Experience didn’t prepare him for Breakdown to let him go, to back off with what sounded like an apology and crouch in front of him, so he could look up into his face with a worried frown. He blinked. Had his reaction been so obvious? What... what did he do now? Any of his masters would have punished him for such an obvious rejection, but Breakdown just looked concerned. He asked a question, but Knock Out just shook his head in incomprehension. He didn’t understand any of this, and his spark wouldn’t stop whirling in his chest and making him lightheaded. The barbarian reached up and he flinched back, grabbing the side of the berth for balance.

It seemed to get through to him, and Breakdown stood up and stepped back, his hand extended but not close enough to touch. He said something, his voice soft and- of all things- apologetic, and with that tone of voice the offered hand seemed almost like a peace offering. Knock Out eyed him, and Breakdown gestured to the both of them, and to the tent flap again. He then held up his hands and backed off a step, then beckoned to him, coaxing him.

Slowly, Knock Out inched towards him, testing his balance and the strength of his legs. He couldn’t run, and he couldn’t transform and drive with the patch over his wound. But Breakdown had backed off the moment he’d shown fear, it seemed he had no desire to hurt him. And he did want to see outside. The barbarian waited for him, patient, and when Knock Out drew level with him he offered his arm for him to hold on to. Knock Out took it, and the warm metal felt much better when it was under his hands rather than enveloping him. Almost pleasant.

Breakdown led him outside slowly, and he had to reset his vision again out in the harsh daylight, loathe as he was to take his eyes off anyone here. He tensed when he opened them again and found several sets of eyes on him, open and curious, but nobody tried to approach him and Breakdown was a weirdly reassuring shield. He let him look around, taking his time to take in the small groups of bots around him. Apparently the novelty of him soon wore off and they went back to what they were doing, and he managed to relax enough to let Breakdown show him around.
The camp was tiny compared to the city he’d come from, perhaps only a few dozen bots, and it was clear that everything here was temporary. There were no permanent roads or paths, only the well-trodden areas where the ground was a slightly different colour, or burnt patches where there had been fires previously. Most of the tents were around the same size, aside from the one they had come from and two or three others clustered around it which were larger. Clearly the one he’d been holed up in was the healer’s tent, and he suspected the others might belong to tribe leaders, or perhaps a priest. Did they have those? He doubted there was much room for temples here.

There were other bots around, standing guard near the edge of the camp, and one particular bot caught Knock Out’s attention. He was taller than any around him, painted blue and bright red, and Knock Out’s spark gave a weird little tug as he laid eyes on him. As Knock Out stared he almost seemed to sense his attention, because he turned an inquisitive, blue-eyed gaze on him after a few moments. Breakdown paused and said something, inclining his head politely as the other bot started to approach. Knock Out, on the other hand, couldn’t resist shrinking back behind him. He didn’t doubt that this one could snap him in half if he so desired.

But he did the same bizarre thing Breakdown had; he stopped. He came to a halt well out of arm’s reach, apparently deciding to talk to Breakdown from there rather than getting up close and personal, or trying to touch Knock Out, even though he heard his name in the conversation a couple of times so it was obvious they were talking about him. Breakdown didn’t try to make him come out from behind him either, and that on its own was enough to make him feel slightly braver and come out on his own. Perhaps he had a protector here.

The large barbarian was probably some kind of leader, judging by the deference shown to him, but there was nothing particularly fierce about him now that Knock Out looked more closely. In fact his smile was kind when he looked at him, his voice a gentle rumble. It was difficult not to return that smile, though Knock Out’s own was still nervous and his spark was still doing something strange. Breakdown noticed and gestured to his leader to get Knock Out’s attention, then slowly and clearly said “Optimus Prime.”.

Knock Out stalled for a moment, then instinct took over and he immediately dropped to his knees, muffling a hiss as his wound was jostled. A Prime, out here? And he had just looked at him and smiled so casually? He’d never even seen a Prime up close before; even the masters who had been high enough for an audience with one hadn’t for a moment considered bringing their berth toy to the meeting. He’d probably have been killed for sullying the holy leader with his mere gaze back home. He wanted to beg mercy, but surely daring to speak without permission would only be worse.

Someone touched his shoulder and he froze, eyes firmly on the dirt as the Prime’s voice came from just over his head, barely audible over the humming of his spark. He sounded… concerned? Hard to say, but Breakdown’s reply was definitely worried as he called his name. The Prime’s hand cupped his face and lifted his chin, and he found those bright eyes a scant span from his own. He asked a question, but Knock Out could only shake his head, his hands trembling against the ground. He wasn’t worthy, this wasn’t his place, the Prime was touching him and why would he do that, why would someone so holy touch him and why did it feel familiar? He didn’t dare pull away until he
was released and the Prime’s footsteps retreated, and only then did he glance up to find Breakdown crouching at his side, his hand held out for him to take.

He took it and let him pull him upright, let himself lean on him for just a moment as he asked something. The same question the Prime had asked. What could that even mean? He just shook his head, lost, and Breakdown gestured back towards the healer’s tent. Knock Out nodded; yes, going back seemed like the best idea. He had to figure out what had just happened. What was a Prime doing out in the wilds, instead of in the heart of the city where he could rule as Primus- or at least, his priests- proclaimed? And why had he allowed Knock Out to look at him, why had he touched him? Surely he must see what he was, when it felt like his eyes had seen through to his very core? Did this mean Breakdown was important too, if he’d talked to him so casually?

But he couldn't ask, and they couldn't tell him. All he could do was stick close to Breakdown as they made their way back and watch the activity of the camp around him. A few bots stopped Breakdown to talk, and Knock Out listened and tried to find meaning in their words. He was starting to notice a few words similar to his own language at least; he caught something that sounded like ‘energon’ and a couple of other words, but not enough to make sense of the conversation. The effort was draining, and by the time they made it back to the tent he was inclined to fall into recharge again.

Breakdown helped him back onto the berth, and he smiled and mumbled a thank you as he settled down. The big bot seemed about to reply, when from outside came the roar of a jet engine coming in to land. He perked up instantly, grinned, and with what sounded like a goodbye he bolted from the tent, leaving Knock Out to fall asleep alone and confused.
“Starscream!” Breakdown yelled as he ran outside, just in time to see the jet transform midair and land on his feet in a dramatic, graceful slide. His call was lost amid others, members of the tribe attracted by the theatrics as Starscream straightened up and brushed dust from his plating. His grace didn't last for long; he was almost immediately tackled by two other Seekers, toppling all three of them to the ground in a tangle of wings and long limbs.

“Brother! We were worried you were gone for good this time!” Skywarp crowed, gleefully nuzzling against the wriggling Starscream as he tried to escape his embrace.

“It's only been a week, Skywarp! Get off of me!” He protested, swatting at Thundercracker as he laughed at him and eventually managing to extract himself from the pile.

“Well, yes, but that tank who carried you off was very handsome and we thought you might accept him.”

“You thought that, Skywarp, we all know nobody's good enough for Starscream.” Thundercracker teased, nudging Starscream with his elbow as the grey jet's wings flicked up indignantly.

“There's nothing wrong with having some standards!” He drew himself up to his full height, as dignified as it was possible to be after being tackled to the dirt, “He was a bore and a brute and far too slow to even escort me home, I enjoy a little intelligent conversation rather than just a lot of flexing. Not that you'd know anything about that, Skywarp.”

“Hey!” Skywarp went to protest, but Starscream was already stalking away on his long, shapely legs.

Fortunately, his route towards his tent took him right past Breakdown, who managed to wave and get his attention. The Seeker was of a height with him but weighed maybe a quarter as much, his slender grace a sharp contrast to most of the bots in the tribe who were far more solid. There were still some who thought of him and his trinemates as outsiders, but just because they hadn't started life in the wilds didn't mean they didn't contribute. In fact, it was that very nature that made him so useful to Breakdown right now. Unfortunately, he didn't seem especially disposed to be helpful.

“What is it Breakdown?” He drawled, somehow managing to look down his nose while looking straight ahead. “I've had a long flight and I've little interest in chit-chat.”

“I know, I'll make this quick. We rescued a city-dweller from Predaking while you were gone and
his language sounds kind of like one of the ones you spoke when you uh, joined us. He's scared to slag of everyone and… I dunno, seems like a good idea to explain to him that we're gonna take him home once his injuries heal,” Breakdown explained, turning to walk with Starscream as he started moving again. The Seeker at least seemed to consider his words, cocking his head and tapping his chin as he sauntered through the camp towards one of the energon distilleries.

“Hmm. Just the one?”

“Yeah, there were others with him but they left him for dead. It's weird though, he looks important. All gold and shiny paint, you know?”

“I see.” Starscream blinked slowly as he poured fuel for himself, and he waited until he'd drunk it before he replied, his mouth curling in distaste, “So you want me to reassure some spoiled cityling that the nasty savages won't hurt him?”

“Uh… Well I'd rather you didn't put it like that but… Yeah?”

“Fine. Tomorrow, though. I want to rest and relax a while first. Why didn't you ask my brothers?”

Breakdown pulled a face, “They're… not as good with words. And I don't think they ever learned as many languages as you did?”

Starscream smirked, though it seemed a little forced, “Good answer. No, they didn't learn our captors’ tongue beyond what they needed to get by. I'll speak with him, provided he's not too self-important, but you'll owe me.”

Breakdown nodded, keeping his thoughts on Starscream and self-importance to himself.

“Thanks, Starscream. I'll bring you some of those sweet crystals that grow on our patrol route, does that sound good?”

“It will suffice,” Starscream nodded, waving him off with a taloned hand as he drank some more. Breakdown left him be, feeling a little lighter now he knew at least someone could hopefully talk to Knock Out, perhaps soothe his nerves. He'd never seen anyone react like that to Optimus, he'd never really encountered anyone who was frightened of him at all. On the contrary, he was the kind of bot who seemed to put others at ease, always calm and steady with an authoritative presence that made it seem like he had all the answers. But Knock Out had been even more terrified of him than he had been of Breakdown, and he desperately wanted to know why. It occurred to him that maybe he should have brought that up with the Seeker, but it was a little late now. Maybe he'd find out anyway, all Breakdown could do was wait and keep trying to communicate with Knock Out in their awkward, stunted game of charades.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Finally, someone who understands...

Knock Out slept through much of the rest of the day, interrupted only by Breakdown checking his wound, and a spark-stopping moment when the Prime poked his head through the tent flap to speak with the other medic, who’s name he had managed to deduce was ‘Ratchet’. Knock Out pretended to be unconscious throughout, hands tucked under the blankets to hide how they trembled. Even at a distance, the Prime seemed to tug at his spark, as though some strange power called Knock Out to him, and it frightened him. Nobody else seemed to feel it; the medic even laughed at something the Prime said, something he was sure he hadn't heard him do before, and they left together and let him drift into recharge alone.

He was awoken by voices the next morning and looked up to see Breakdown talking to a tall, slender flier near the tent entrance. Not just any flier, he realised. The expressive wings and build marked him as a Vosian; something Knock Out had only encountered rarely, being sold for extortionate prices that even his exquisite looks couldn't command. They’d become exceptionally fashionable in Kaon, after the city of spires had fallen to their superior might. But this Vosian wasn't in chains, his wings held high and proud even as they fluttered at whatever Breakdown said to him, and his scarlet eyes were bright and interested rather than dim and broken-spirited.

That sharp gaze quickly landed on him, and the Vosian gestured and said something that made Breakdown exit the tent. Immediately Knock Out felt more vulnerable; when had Breakdown started feeling like a protector?

“You can stop pretending to be offline now,” the Vosian remarked, and Knock Out lifted his head and stared as he realised he could understand him. He dropped his eyes quickly, and the Vosian made a curious little sound. “Hmm. Breakdown said he thought you were a noble, or a priest or some such. But you won't even look me in the eyes, and you wear a collar, so I doubt that's true, is it?”

“No, sir,” he shook his head. How had they gotten that idea? He flinched when the Vosian snorted.

“Sir? I like that, it's been a very, very long time since anyone's shown me proper respect. But there's no need for that; by Kaon standards I'm no better than you. You may call me Starscream, Breakdown asked me to explain things to you. I'm sure you have questions, but first, your name?”

Knock Out nodded, relaxing a little. Oh, he had so many questions, and it was so hard to decide which to ask first, which was most pressing. Which would he even be permitted? “My name is Knock Out. I would like to know what's expected of me, if nothing else.” He said, his fingers curling into the blanket as he pushed himself fully upright. If Starscream had once been in his
position, as he implied, perhaps he would understand, “I don’t know what Breakdown- or anyone else- wants from me, it... makes things difficult.”

“What's expected?” Starscream cocked his head at him, and there was something approaching pity in his face, “Very little, honestly. What's expected of you is to heal enough that you can be taken home, at least, that's what was assumed.” The Vosian considered him, his talons tapping on his chin. Knock Out noticed how sharp they were, a stark contrast to the filed down stubs he’d seen on others of his kind. “But having seen you, I'm not sure that's what you'd want at all. I've lived in Kaon. I know what things are like for slaves there.”

Knock Out’s grip on the blanket tightened a little. “Then you know that what I want doesn't matter. You know what happens to runaways.”

“They don’t survive, so they say. But you aren't dead, are you? They have no power to take you back, here. I would know. I'm sure Breakdown would return you if you asked him to, but this tribe doesn't hold with slavery. Haven't you ever dreamed of being free?”

“Of course.” Who hadn't? But it had always been an impossible dream, like imagining that he could fly. It seemed far too easy for it to be within his grasp now, through sheer accident.

“You can have that. It'll take you a little while to learn the language, the customs, but you wouldn't be the first stray Prime’s taken in and you won't be the last. You've met him, Breakdown mentioned that?”

“Yes. How can you talk about him so irreverently? Is he not a real Prime?”

“Oh, he's the real thing. But he leads by example, not shows of force and power. The tribes believe that Primes are guides to show us the way, not chosen to conquer from on high in their golden towers.” Starscream’s mouth curled irritably, but Knock Out decided not to ask. Vos, he knew from listening to his master, had been razed at the order of the Prime. That, he supposed, would explain why Starscream was so familiar with Kaon’s unsavoury side.

He considered it, fiddling with the blanket. “He would let me join the tribe? Even though I have no useful skills? I don't know exactly what you think I am but it wasn't exactly skilled work.” His thighs squeezed together, and though they were covered by the blanket the downwards flick of Starscream’s gaze showed that he’d noticed. His wings twitched and for a moment Knock Out thought he'd been too bold, instinctively steeled himself for punishment or rebuke. But no, Starscream didn't strike him.

“You can learn. You're too small and soft to be any kind of warrior, but you look fast so you might make a decent scout, or else you could learn a craft. And nobody here will touch you without your consent, so you don't need to clamp your legs shut every time someone looks at you.”

“You'll have to forgive me if I have a hard time believing that. Experience has always suggested otherwise.” He shuddered, pulled his knees up protectively.

“That I can believe,” Starscream nodded sympathetically, thinking for a moment. “I'll tell them the truth about you, since it'll be a while until you have the words to do so yourself.”

“Is there... any way you could not do that? Just... let them think I'm someone worthwhile for a little longer?”
“I could. But these bots value honesty. You'll probably look better telling the truth straight away than you will when it comes out later. They won't treat you worse as a former slave than they would as a senator. Might even treat you better, considering what you've been through.”

Knock Out considered it, studying his blanket-covered knees. “Maybe. The lie must be fairly flimsy if you clocked me so easily.”

“To be fair, I know what I'm looking for. They see expensive taste and assume it must be yours, rather than your master’s. Former master’s. I assume you don't want to go back?”

“No.” he shuddered, shaking his head. If Starscream was telling the truth, this place could be paradise. It was a big if, but he found that presented with the chance of freedom he'd rather die than give himself back to his old life. “Tell them the truth, please. I want to stay. I don't know if I even could go back.” No doubt his master would have replaced him already, with something prettier. He was damaged goods now, he thought as he rested his fingertips against the patch on his chest. Worthless.

“Good choice. In that case, I can start teaching you their language. I would offer you a download, but...” he pulled a face, tapping a panel in his arm that would normally conceal a data transfer cable, but seemed to have been crudely welded shut at some point, “apparently my former masters considered me untrustworthy enough to remove that ability. No matter. If Skywarp could learn it, you'll manage.”

“Thank you,” Knock Out even managed a tiny smile, and perhaps he was far too quick to trust Starscream, but it was such a relief to talk to someone he understood, someone who seemed to see him as an equal no less, that it was far too easy to relax. Except for one little thing, one little thing that was making his tank churn nervously…

“What do you want in return?”

Starscream chuckled and examined his claws. “From you, nothing. Breakdown asked me to talk to you, and he’s agreed sufficient compensation for my efforts. If you owe anyone, it's him, and he's too kind to ask when he knows full well you have nothing.”

Somehow, that completely failed to be reassuring. Breakdown had been nothing but kind, but Starscream was right; Knock Out owed him his life. What if he decided to call in that debt? He vented hard, making up his mind. “Then I'd best learn how to thank him properly, at the very least.”

Starscream smiled, then crossed the tent to sit on the berth next to Knock Out’s and leaned down to get on his level.

“That's a good place to start. Now pay attention, you have a lot to learn…”
To Breakdown, it seemed that Starscream had been gone for an age by the time the Seeker sought him out. He’d be lying if he said he hadn’t worried at all about what Knock Out might say, what thoughts he might reveal to someone who could understand them, but Starscream didn't seem especially perturbed or worried when he dropped down from the sky and landed in front of him with a flourish. Totally unnecessary, but he and his brothers had always seemed to enjoy their theatrics and most of the tribe humoured them at this point.

“Did you talk to him?” Breakdown tried to contain his eagerness, but he couldn't manage small talk or not fidgeting as he awaited the answer.

“I did.” Starscream, on the other hand, seemed to be being deliberately slow and casual, brushing dust from his plating and flicking his wings a couple of times to settle them comfortably on his shoulders, despite Breakdown’s restlessness. “He seems a little reassured now that the situation has been explained to him, and you’ll be pleased to hear that he wants to stay.” He smirked when he heard Breakdown’s fans whirr in surprise

“What? Why would he do that? I mean, that’s great, but why would I be happy about that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You just seemed rather invested in his well being. I assumed you had some designs on him, he is very pretty,” Starscream purred, then held up a hand, “But you should really know that you’ve formed a few misconceptions about him.”

Breakdown blinked, cocked his head at him. “What do you mean?”

“He’s no noble, quite the opposite in fact. The collar he wears signifies that he belongs to someone—or belonged, I suppose.”

“Belonged… you mean, he was a slave? That’s awful!”

“Quite right it is! So you’d best make an effort to treat him well. He doesn’t know how to be a free bot, I suppose we’ll have to teach him. Luckily for you you have me to teach him our language or you’d never get anywhere.” Starscream was preening, and Breakdown felt no guilt for interrupting him.

“Wait, so… is that why he…” His fans buzzed and he felt his plating heat in embarrassment. “He doesn’t think I want to… you know, keep him like that, does he?”

“Perhaps he did. But I’ve set him straight on that matter. He knows you won’t hurt him now, you should go and see him later in fact. He has some things to say to you.”

Breakdown opened his mouth to question that, but Starscream was already sauntering away with a little wave of his hand. He frowned after him. What in the Pit could Knock Out say to him when they didn’t even speak the same language? He supposed he’d just have to find out; it was around time to bring the city bot some fuel anyway.

When he peered into the tent, however, Knock Out didn’t seem to notice him right away. He had his back to the flap and was holding on to one of the support poles, looking at the bunches of thin crystal stems hanging from the roof. He reached up to touch one just as Breakdown let himself in, and the sudden light caught his attention and had him whipping around wide-eyed, fast enough to make himself wince when he tugged at his wound. “Hey, Knock Out, it’s okay, just me.” He said, holding
up his hands. It was a strange relief that Knock Out relaxed almost immediately when he recognised him.
“Sorry,” Knock Out said sheepishly and shuffled towards him, moving carefully. Breakdown couldn’t help but smile to hear him speaking his language, however simple the words.
“It’s okay,” he nodded, holding up the fuel he’d brought, “Energon?”

“Please.” Knock Out perched back on his berth and took the container, holding it between his delicate hands for a moment to appreciate it before he drank. Breakdown could understand; it was as fresh as it could get, still warm from processing.

Now he had a chance to look, to see Knock Out for what he was, he didn’t know how he’d ever mistaken him for someone used to calling the shots or even getting his own way. He always seemed to make himself smaller when he sat; he avoided people’s eyes, kept his legs close together and his arms tucked against his sides and his head down to avoid drawing attention. The gold collar around his neck, assumed to be some kind of strange city fashion, drew his eyes now like a flame and he wanted nothing more than to destroy it, to rip it off and melt it down in front of him so Knock Out knew he would never have to go back to that life.

Knock Out seemed to notice him looking and he eyed him from behind his energon, wary. Breakdown managed to look sheepish, and touched his fingers to his neck where the collar would sit. “Do you want me to take that off?” He asked, miming grasping something and pulling it away from his neck.

It didn’t quite have the intended effect. Knock Out flinched and leaned away from him, covering the collar with a hand protectively. Had he misunderstood? Breakdown crouched down in an attempt to be less threatening and gestured to his neck again. From that angle he could see better, and he felt his spark sink as he realised there was no visible clasp on the collar, just a single smooth band, like it had been welded in place and buffed to hide the seam. Knock Out shook his head, and the way it moved suggested the collar was stuck to the back of his neck, not just wrapped around it. Maybe he should get Ratchet to look at it, he thought as he pushed himself back onto his feet. “Sorry. It just looks painful.”

Knock Out watched him, but when he didn’t try and approach him again he relaxed a bit. He almost seemed to be gathering his courage for something as he finished his fuel and deliberately set the container aside, meeting Breakdown’s eyes for a moment as he touched the collar. “No. Please?”

“Okay. No touching.” Breakdown nodded, and was rewarded with Knock Out instantly relaxing. He supposed it could wait until they could understand each other better.

“Thank you.” He vented audibly, then continued; “thank you for saving me.”

Breakdown blinked, surprised. It was easily the most he’d heard Knock Out speak at once, even if it sounded like a phrase he’d practised rather than something he’d said spontaneously.

“Oh! It’s… no problem. I mean, what else was I supposed to do?” He smiled, and received only a blank look. Right, Starscream couldn’t exactly have him fluent in a couple of hours. “You’re
“Welcome?” He tried, and Knock Out smiled. Hesitantly, yes, but it was a real smile and Breakdown’s spark felt like it might escape from his chest. Sure, it probably wouldn’t be easy, but it was so strangely good to know that he was going to stay, that they might get to know each other better. It would be so good, seeing him become less afraid, settle into the way they lived. Perhaps even… no. No that was stupid to think about, he doubted Knock Out would want a mate after all he’d been through. He gave himself a good mental shake.

Back to business. He gestured to Knock Out’s wounded side, and the city bot nodded and allowed him to examine the injury, which already seemed smaller as his self-repair worked to rebuild it. The edges were bright, shiny silver where they’d grown but the paint hadn’t regenerated, and he made a mental note to get him some of the good, rich ore they’d found near their last camp. It would help a lot with the healing if he had enough raw material to work with. At least his patient seemed calm enough; he watched his every move, but he seemed relaxed about it provided his hands didn’t stray towards his collar or too close to his waist.

He let him be once he was done with that, promising to return in the morning even if he was fairly certain Knock Out wouldn’t understand. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard Knock Out reply as the tent flap closed behind him.
A week or so passed, with Starscream visiting every morning and Breakdown coming in intermittently throughout the day, and Knock Out found himself learning faster than he’d ever imagined he could. He’d never really been presented with the idea that he could be intelligent; some former owners had allowed him access to their libraries but he’d never been tested in anything. Learning from Starscream was different; he was relentless and demanding, insisted he spoke the tribal language at every opportunity and all but refused to speak to him in Kaonite except to teach him new words, but when Knock Out managed to ask— with perfect grammar no less— if he could go outside, the flier rewarded him with a smile and a small, blueish crystal from the pouch he fished from his subspace.

“Well done, you’re learning remarkably quickly. Yes, I think you can. You live here now, you can go wherever you want.” He said, repeating himself more slowly when Knock Out struggled to keep up. “Eat that. It’s good.”

“What is it?” He examined the crystal more closely, holding it between his fingers and letting it catch the light. That was fast becoming his favourite phrase, since it was a perfect way to pick up new vocabulary. Breakdown always seemed delighted to show him things, and even gruff Ratchet had spent a little time showing him the different plants he used in his medicine, explaining their use in a combination of miming and pointing to body parts along with words.

“Energon crystal.” Starscream explained, tossing one into his mouth and crunching down on it with evident delight, and that was enough to convince Knock Out to try it.

His eyes widened at the burst of flavour, the slight electric crackle as the crystal shattered between his teeth, and he didn’t say anything as he savoured it. “Good?” Starscream asked, his smile suggesting he knew exactly how good it was. Knock Out nodded, his mouth occupied, and Starscream handed him another one for good measure before he got up. “Let’s go then. A walk will be good for you.”

Knock Out nodded and scrambled up after him, having to almost trot to keep up with Starscream’s long stride. It took him a moment to realise that he could do that, rather than having to hobble around all the time, and he marvelled at how quickly he was healing. Every scratch and scrape he’d gotten in the past had always seemed to take an age to heal, but he supposed he was better fed than he’d ever been. And the fuel out here was so much better. Even wounded, he had far more energy than he’d ever had before. The tribe were becoming accustomed to his presence, too, and only a couple of bots looked up as he and Starscream exited the healer’s tent. They smiled at him, and he
found himself smiling back. The barbarians didn’t seem quite so frightening any more. The tales had
only ever talked of them marauding or raping and pillaging, not repairing equipment on colourful
mats outside their homes and laughing at each other’s jokes, or gently wiping mud from the face of a
much smaller, protesting bot. They were hard to be afraid of when it was so obvious how much they
cared for each other.

Starscream did slow down for him after a few moments, letting him catch up and walk side by side
with him. Even the gentle exercise was part of the lesson, Starscream pointing to things and asking
Knock Out to name them in the tribe’s tongue, telling him the word if he didn’t already know it, or
asking him questions and expecting him to answer. He used encounters with other bots to
demonstrate proper manners, and the others seemed delighted to get involved with teaching the
newcomer. They encouraged him to talk to them, to practise gestures and greetings, and their smiles
when he got it right made him feel downright strange. They were happy for him, interested in him,
and now that he truly looked he saw that their eyes didn’t wander over his body like so many others
had. If they were looking, they respected him enough to hide it, and that revelation made his
processor spin.

They had just finished one such conversation, Knock Out dipping his head in the customary parting
gesture, when a cry went up from one of the lookouts. It was a call that meant a patrol was
returning, as he had learned over the last week, and the nearing dustcloud was soon visible even to
him. The three usual patrol members hurtled through the ring of tents a minute later and transformed
with a flourish, and he realised with a start that there were, in fact, four bots there, one being carried
by another. Starscream saw him looking and nudged his arm with a little smirk. “Come, I think this
will be educational for you.”

Knock Out took a couple of steps after him and froze. The extra bot’s hands, he could see now,
were bound, and he was slung so carelessly over the other’s shoulder. Like some prize or trophy
carried off from battle. Starscream sighed, his wings fluttering, and looked back at him. “Are you
coming?”

He didn’t want to, but obedience was second nature to him and he shuffled after the Vosian,
watching with dread as the captive was lowered to the ground. The tribe was starting to gather, and
with it the sick feeling in his tanks. “There’s nothing to fear.” Starscream told him as they halted near
the edge of the loose circle forming around the camp centre, where they could see without being in
the way. And now, closer to the action, Knock Out could see that the captive didn’t look particularly
concerned by his captor circling around behind him. A moment later his bonds were cut, and he
turned with his hands on his hips to look the other bot up and down, his eyes critical. If anything the
captor looked more nervous, standing straight and flaring out his plating to make himself look bigger
and stronger.

A few tense moments passed, then the captive shrugged and reached out a hand. His captor seemed
to deflate with relief as he took the offer, then turned and led him away to his tent amid what Knock
Out suspected were catcalls from the rest of the tribe. He just stood confused, watching them go, and
Starscream chuckled somewhere over his head.

“You see? Nothing to worry about.”
“What… what was that?”

“Traditional tribal courtship. I know, it alarmed me too at first. But it’s all very carefully controlled, quite nuanced actually.” Starscream shrugged, switching to Kaonite. It seemed he knew full well Knock Out wouldn’t understand enough for this conversation. “Kidnapping is nuanced?”

“It’s not exactly kidnapping. It’s more… capture in battle I suppose? Occasionally patrols cross paths, and a bot from one tribe might find one from another attractive. So of course, they challenge them to a fight, and if they win they may take the other bot back to their tribe, as you’ve just seen. The loser is only obliged to give their captor three days to win them over, and after that they can demand to be returned home whenever they want, and the captor must take them. It’s not about hurting anyone or forcing them to do anything, it’s about showing them that you are strong and capable and would make a good mate.”

It seemed more reasonable, Knock Out had to admit, when Starscream put it like that. But still…

“And what if someone doesn’t play by the rules?” He asked quietly. A bot taken from their friends, nobody to defend them. In his experience, anybody would take advantage.

“The rules are sacred. Someone who tried to force someone to stay or to frag them—” Starscream didn’t even notice Knock Out’s wince, “—would find themselves cast out by their own tribe. After all, if the other bot’s tribe found out, there would be a fight. The tribe could be destroyed. Nobody wants that. And nobody wants a rapist in their midst either.”

Knock Out swallowed a response, just shaking his head. Nobody had ever seemed to care overly much back in the city. “I suppose that makes sense. And… what if you just find someone, say, injured out in the wilds? Can you just… take them?”

“That,” Starscream said, raising a brow ridge, “is called rescuing someone. It’s got nothing to do with courting them. And what happens after that, whether they stay or return home, is up to them. You’ve chosen to stay, so you’ll be a proper member of the tribe soon. Optimus just wants you to be able to understand the ceremony. Is that what you’re worried about, that Breakdown expects something from you?”

“. . .It’s not out of the question.” Knock Out mumbled after a pause, his fans whirring in shame. Starscream’s face softened for a moment, then he patted him on the shoulder and turned away, gesturing for him to follow.

“No, he doesn’t want anything like that from you. I doubt he thinks you’d ever look twice at him.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he says as much any time anyone asks him about it. He knows you’re not interested and he’s not going to put any pressure on you about it, not after everything he imagines you’ve been through. I told you before, nobody here expects anything from you, nor will they touch you without your permission.”

“Oh.” He fell silent for a while, letting Starscream lead him back through the camp to settle with a small group working on processing energon crystals harvested earlier that day. The process was fascinating, and he watched quietly for a while before his mind caught on something particular Starscream had said.

“‘Ceremony?’”

“Hmm?”
“You said about a ceremony, before?”
“Oh, that. Nothing to worry about. Whenever someone new joins the tribe there’s a ceremony to welcome them. Prime will give a speech, introduce you formally to everyone, and then we all have far too much fuel and enjoy ourselves. There’s usually dancing, I don’t know if anyone in Kaon even does that.”
“Only for other people to look at.” He pulled a face, instantly uncertain about the whole ordeal.
One of the other members of the group cocked his head at him and smiled.
“It’s fun, don’t worry.” He said, speaking slowly to make sure he would understand. “Everyone is too busy enjoying it to look at everyone else. It’s time to make friends, not lovers.”

“Hmm. Maybe, then.” Knock Out nodded, unconvinced. He would most certainly not be doing that. The only dancing he’d ever seen had been far too suggestive, especially considering his missing panels. But he could watch, perhaps, learn more about the people he was to join.

They stayed a little longer, lingering until the energon had finished processing and they could drink it still warm, which was wonderful, and then they made their way back to the medic’s tent where Ratchet was nowhere to be seen, but Breakdown’s eyes brightened at the sight of them.

“Oh good, you’re back. Optimus was here, looking for you… are you okay?” He frowned a little as Knock Out felt his expression go from a smile to something akin to dread.
“Why?”
“It’s okay, he just wants to talk I think,” Breakdown said, gesturing for Knock Out to come and sit down on his berth. He complied, glancing back as Starscream cleared his throat, waved and exited the tent to leave them alone together. After their earlier conversation, Knock Out wasn’t sure what to make of that. “You don’t have to be scared, Optimus is nice.”
“Sorry.”
“You don’t have to be. You’re new, and you’re learning.”
“Mmm. He’ll come back?”

“Yeah. And Ratchet. He wants me to-” a couple of words Knock Out didn’t understand, “-you. Is that okay?”
“What?” The question had Knock Out leaning back a little, worried. Ratchet hadn’t been involved with him much, though he’d deduced that Breakdown answered to him and he’d seen him looking after other patients.
“To um… look at you? All of you? Like I do with this.” He pointed to his wound, then gestured to all of Knock Out. His claws curled against the berth and he felt the energon in his tank churn.
Breakdown was fine, he told himself. Breakdown had never done anything to him, had no desire to. But the thought of anyone’s hands all over him made panic flicker in the back of his mind, even ones as gentle as Breakdown’s. But surely, Breakdown would get in trouble if he forced him to disobey Ratchet’s orders.

Breakdown seemed to notice his hesitation and frowned, and Knock Out ducked his head submissively and averted his eyes. “It’s okay.” Breakdown’s voice came as a soft rumble. “You don’t have to. I’ll tell him.”

“It will be okay?” He looked up, still not quite meeting those lovely amber eyes, “for you, too?”
“What? Oh, yeah. Ratchet won’t be mad. We won’t do anything you don’t want, okay? That’s important.”
Knock Out nodded, relieved. He’d gotten the idea already that refusing to be touched wouldn’t get him punished, but to hear it stated explicitly was reassuring. “Later, maybe. But not now. Too much.”

“Okay. I’ll tell Optimus and Ratchet to let you rest, yeah? Have you fuelled?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Good. I’ll leave you alone then.” Breakdown pushed away from the berth, and something in Knock Out’s chest twisted strangely. He didn’t quite know why, but he wanted him there just a little longer.

“Wait. I…” No, it was stupid, what was he supposed to say? “Thank you, Breakdown. You are very kind. See you soon?”

“You’re welcome? Yeah, I’ll be back in a few hours. With Optimus, maybe.”

“Okay.” Knock Out nodded, then once Breakdown had gone he laid down to rest. He didn’t sleep though; the day had left him far too much to think about.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

What up everyone I'm back from vacation, it's a short one but I think an important one.

Breakdown left him to rest, as promised, and made his way through the camp to report to Ratchet. The old medic turned out to be with a patient, who was sitting outside his creators’ tent and trying his best to put on a brave face while Ratchet examined some torn off plating on his arm. Ratchet didn't even look up when Breakdown approached, just said, “hand me a screwdriver,” and held out his hand. Breakdown complied almost without thinking about it and smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way at the patient.

“Hey, Hot Rod, what happened this time?”

He was rewarded by the little bot puffing up his plating proudly, only to wince when the injured bit tried to move.

“I almost beat Jazz in a race! I would have, but I, uh, crashed a bit… I'll get him next time!”

“Wow, pretty impressive.”

“Hmph. I'd be more impressed if I wasn't the one fixing this.” Ratchet grumbled, “Sparklings already think they're invincible, Breakdown, don't encourage him.”

“I'm not a sparkling! I'm nearly an adult!”

“Tell me that again when you come up higher than my waist, scraplet. Lucky for you this was a clean tear and I can just replace the whole plate instead of digging little bits of metal out of your wires. But be more careful next time, you could have really hurt yourself. Honestly, I don't know how you haven't given your poor creators a meltdown yet.” Ratchet shook his head with a huff from his vents and set about taking measurements of the missing plate, while Hot Rod looked vaguely stunned. He stayed quiet until Ratchet was done with him and shooed him off back into the tent with a promise to come fit the new plate tomorrow and stern instructions to sit still for once, damnit!

Breakdown watched him scurry away and offered Ratchet a hand to stand up, which was waved away with a grumble. “I'm not that old, Breakdown. Even if I swear that bitlet ages me a century every time he sets foot outside.”

“He's not that bad. Just… ambitious.”

“And he's going to get himself killed if he doesn't rein it in. Now, I assume you didn't come looking for me to watch me patch up Hot Rod. What is it?”

“It's Knock Out. He doesn't want a full exam, I don't think he wants to be touched that much. So I told him it's fine, he doesn't have to.”
“Hmm. It would be better. Who knows what kind of damage or viruses he's picked up over the years?” Ratchet frowned, scratching his chin. “If he's staying, his health is our responsibility. I don't want him dropping dead from something we could have fixed. But…” he sighed and folded his arms, his eyes dimming, “I can’t say I blame him. You'll just have to be vigilant while you're treating his wound.”

“Yeah… about that…” Breakdown shifted his weight uncomfortably, looking away from Ratchet's gaze. “Are you sure you can't treat him?”

“What?”

“Look, before you say anything I know I can do a good job. It's just… hard to explain. Being around him is hard. I'm worried I'll be… I don't know…”

“Tempted?” Ratchet quirked a brow ridge at him. Breakdown's eyes widened a moment and his plating burned with shame. Was it so obvious? “He's beautiful, yes?”

“Yeah…”

“You want him?” Ratchet persisted, stepping closer. Breakdown backed off, wondering if this was some kind of trap.

“Well…”

“What are you, Breakdown?”

“What?”

“Are you an animal? Some turbofox who doesn't know any better? Or are you a bot with reason and self control? Yes, he's attractive, but you know better than to just fondle people without asking and you're not going to forget that just because a flashy paint job and a pretty bumper catches your eye. Are you?”

“No Ratchet.”

Ratchet reached out and tapped him on the head gently. “Then there’s no problem. You’re a capable medic, Breakdown. I entrusted his care to you because I think you can handle it, and you need to prove that to yourself.” He assured him, offering a rare smile that helped Breakdown relax just a little. “And I’ll be there if you do need help. You're not alone in this.”

“It’s… just that? You’re not trying to… I don’t know, engineer something between us?” Ratchet snorted. “Primus, no. Certainly not in the circumstances. I want the best for both of you, I’m fairly certain a relationship isn’t that right now.”

“Both of us?” Ratchet faltered, fans whirring. “Well, of course. He’s a patient, I want the best for all my patients. Speaking of which, I suspect he’s hungry, you should check. Off you go.” Breakdown opened his mouth to protest but found himself being shooed away abruptly, any attempts to pry further stubbornly ignored.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Short, but PLOT

“You summoned me, oh blessed one?” The ambassador poked his head around the office door warily, gesturing for his new attendant to wait for him outside. The slave shrank away from him into the shadows, where he stayed. Not as well-trained or expensive as the old one, but a reasonable stopgap.

Within, the Prime sat upon his throne, glittering with gold and practically radiating authority and power. The ambassador felt his legs tremble with the urge to sink to his knees, to prostrate himself before that mighty aura. The Prime’s eyes fell upon him, red as burning lithium but somehow cold.

“I did. Enter.” He intoned, gesturing for the ambassador to come closer with one jewel-encrusted hand. He sounded almost bored, but the Prime did not summon anyone for trivial matters, the ambassador knew. He shuffled in, sinking to one knee as he approached the throne. “I hear that you were attacked on your way here, and lost something of value?”

“You heard correctly, exalted one. My transport was set upon by some beast of the wastes, then ambushed by savages. I lost an expensive trinket, but nothing that cannot be replaced,” he assured the Prime, his eyes downcast.

“A trinket? I was led to believe that it was a living mech that was lost?”

“Only a slave, my lord. Killed in the attack. A shame, he was pretty and useful, but as I said, nothing that cannot be replaced.”

“You are certain he was killed?”

“If not by the beast, then the barbarians. He would not last long among their kind, especially not injured.”

The Prime didn’t reply, and the ambassador heard him shift in his throne, saw his shadow loom over him. “I dislike untruths, ambassador.”

“Sir?” His voice came out far smaller and higher-pitched than he liked as that oppressive aura of power washed over him.

“My agents have informed me that his collar is still active, though the I/D chip in his chest appears to be deactivated. Damaged detonator, perhaps. Your slave is still alive and is loose, ambassador. This is unacceptable.” The Prime rose, and the ambassador cringed away just as the slave outside had. He had never felt so small. “I see your little mind working. I know you question my judgement. Why, you wonder, does the Prime care so much about one insignificant escaped slave? Really, it should not matter to you at all, because it is my decree and that of Primus that this escapee must be caught. Or disposed of, failing that. You will not fail me, will you ambassador?” Those burning cold eyes seemed to be melting holes into the back of his head, and he shook it earnestly while his vocaliser...
tried to reset itself.
“N-no, your magnificence! Of course, I will see to it that he is found! I would never dare question
your will.”

“Good. Now do not fail me. Dismissed.” The Prime returned to his throne, and with a gesture sent
the ambassador scurrying for the door. Not fleeing, of course, never fleeing. Just… a swift retreat.

His new slave looked up smartly, standing swiftly to attention and awaiting his orders, but he just
hooked a finger through his collar to drag him off without deigning to speak to him, and ignored the
squeak of alarm that followed as he staggered after him. He would obey the Prime’s orders - he
wasn’t foolish or suicidal enough not to - but first he had some stress to work off, or he’d never be
able to think clearly.
Chapter 12

The next morning, Knock Out awoke with a strange sense that he wasn’t alone in the tent, even before he opened his eyes. This wasn’t unusual; Breakdown and Ratchet were early risers and often working before he woke up, but they were easy to identify from their footsteps or, in Ratchet’s case, muttering to himself. There was silence, aside from the usual background sounds of the camp, but something seemed to press against his spark as though it wanted to draw him closer to it. He almost didn’t dare look for a moment, but the soft footfall of someone large trying to move quietly drew his attention and he sat up, a little too quickly if the protests of his wound were anything to go by.

Optimus Prime looked up from the scrawled notes he’d been examining, his blue eyes bright in the dim light. Knock Out thought his spark stopped spinning for a moment as that gaze enveloped him, fought the overwhelming urge to get on the floor, on his knees, avert his eyes. Optimus didn’t demand any of those things, merely inclined his head in greeting.

“Good morning Knock Out, I hope that I did not wake you?” He said, his voice rich with concern, and Knock Out blinked for a moment before being able to form a reply. It was such a normal question, not what he’d expect a Prime to concern himself with.

“Oh… no, not at all m- sir.” He caught himself from slipping into old habits, certain that the Prime would not appreciate it, but not before he had lowered his eyes to the ground. “Er… Breakdown said that you wanted to talk to me?”

“I do, yes.” The footsteps came closer, and Knock Out held himself still so he wouldn’t flinch. His spark seemed to be pressed up against his plating, as though the Prime was luring it towards him. “May I sit with you?”

He looked up to find Optimus stood almost within arm’s reach of him, his head tilted slightly as he waited for an answer. From him. A Prime was asking his permission. He sat stunned, then drew his legs toward himself under the blanket, leaving space for him, and nodded. Optimus sat, watching him with an inscrutable expression. Fondness, perhaps? Or just the overarching benevolence with which he seemed to view everyone? He didn’t dare think about why the Prime might be fond of him when they’d barely spoken. “You need not be worried. I only wanted to ask how you were settling in. Have you been made to feel welcome?”

“I am… not perfect. Still slow. Still lots more words to learn.”

“Nobody expects perfection immediately. You clearly understand what I am saying to you.” Knock Out nodded, and Optimus was quiet for a few moments before speaking again. “Are you happy here?”

The question took him by surprise and he frowned, having to think about it. “I am not afraid. That is… good. Better than ever before.” But happiness was a low, low bar for him. Feeling safe,
knowing people would respect his wishes, that was more than he’d ever known, and Optimus didn’t look entirely satisfied with the answer. He was frowning, but it didn’t seem like anger. Concern, perhaps? His spark squirmed in his chest, and he felt the need to elaborate. “I am… not used to it. To being able to trust people to listen to me when I say no. I still expect…” He fiddled with his slim fingers in his lap, “Never mind. I think I am happy. I want to stay. I want to learn.” He looked up finally, eyes wide with hope, and it felt like his spark wanted to escape from his chest when he spotted the tiniest smile on Optimus’ face. It didn’t make any sense for him to care so much for the Prime’s approval, but that little quirk of the mouth seemed to erase any lingering fear he still had of him.

“I am glad. We would be honoured to have you as a member of our tribe, as would any other tribe should you choose to move on from us in the future.”

“I… can do that?”

“Of course. Like any other member of the tribe, you could choose to take a mate from another tribe and go to live with them if you wanted. You are free.”

“Free…” Knock Out tried the word in his mouth, his fingers touching against his collar gently. It felt good to hear it said out loud, even if there was still evidence of his captivity that he could never erase.

“Yes. As you should always have been.” Optimus nodded. For a moment, it seemed like he might say something else, but he gave his head a little shake and stood. “Thank you for speaking with me, Knock Out. We will be moving on soon, but I will arrange your initiation into the tribe for before that, if that is agreeable?”

“Please. Starscream said that you were waiting for me to understand enough. I think I do?”

“I think so as well. You belong among us, I believe, and it is time to recognise that officially.” He said, and that tiny smile returned for a fleeting moment before he turned and left, leaving Knock Out wondering what he had meant with that last statement. Had he understood that last word correctly—belong? It didn’t seem to mean the same thing as him belonging to his masters, and perhaps it was the new language taking some of the bite away, but it didn’t fill him with dread as it might once have. He felt safe, even in the awesome presence of the Prime, and he was so caught up in the wonder of that that he barely even noticed Breakdown enter the tent until he moved into his line of sight and made him jump.

“Oh, hey, sorry! You okay?” Breakdown asked, and Knock Out’s fans whirred in embarrassment.

“Yes, fine. Surprised. I was… thinking.” Knock Out managed a smile at least. He found they came easily when he was talking to Breakdown, these days. “The Prime came to see me.”

“Yeah? I thought I saw him leaving. You can just call him Optimus if you want.”

“It doesn’t feel right yet. But he said I belong here. So maybe it will.” He said thoughtfully, and it surprised him all over again when Breakdown grinned at him.

“He’s right. It feels… right, you being here. Like you were always meant to be… that sounds stupid, sorry.” The smile turned sheepish, and Knock Out couldn’t help returning it.

“It’s good to hear. You’ll come to the… ceremony?” He asked, trying out the word.

“Of course. We’re friends, right?”

“I… think so?” He’d never really had a friend before, he supposed, so perhaps that was what the sense of safety and the odd little flutters of his spark when Breakdown was around meant. “I want to be.”
“Then yeah, we’re friends. I’ll be there. Wouldn’t miss it.” He smiled at him, and Knock Out felt his plating heat as he smiled back. Why did it make him feel like this? He didn’t even feel uneasy when Breakdown came over and gestured to his wound. “Do you mind if I take a look? Ratchet says if it’s healing well inside he might be able to close it up, and then you don’t have to worry about the patch any more.”

“Okay.” He considered his options for a moment, then laid back down on his good side so that Breakdown could get to the patch. It still felt invasive and strange, having someone’s fingers poking around his internals, but he’d learned to hold still and mostly ignore it, except for when something fragile was touched and it made him wince. “Sorry.” Breakdown muttered the apology, withdrawing after a while. “It looks good. Your self-repair seems to have fixed all the wiring, there’s just one part that isn’t healing.”

“Not healing?” He frowned, looking over his shoulder at him as his fans started whirring with worry. “Yeah. I can’t tell what part it is- it doesn’t look like anything I’ve seen in anyone else- but the branch you fell on left a hole that hasn’t closed. Can I get Ratchet to take a look?”

“Okay.” He nodded, closing his eyes and drawing in a deep vent. He was proud of himself for only hesitating a little. “Just at that?”

“Just that. Unless there's something else you're worried about?”

“No. It's just that.”

He was saved from changing his mind by Ratchet's arrival, and a quick explanation from Breakdown was all it took to bring the old healer to his side, his brow ridges drawn down in concern. Knock Out shifted to give him better access to the hole in his frame, and nodded when he asked permission to look. Ratchet peered inside, still frowning and muttering too low and fast for Knock Out to keep up, then reached in and nudged something that sent a crackle of painful static discharge through his chest and made him flinch back.

“I'm sorry.” Ratchet said sincerely, withdrawing his hand and flexing his fingers to rid himself of the tingle the static had left. “I’ve discovered the problem. That isn't part of you. That's why it isn't healing along with the rest.”


“I don't know.” Ratchet wiped his hands on a rag and leaned over to peer inside again, his eyes lighting the hole. “But I think it needs to come out. Except it seems to be attached to some of your lines. It will be… difficult. Too painful and delicate to do with you online.”

“Then… you will put me in stasis?” He asked, pushing himself up a little to look at Ratchet, his eyes bright with worry. Whatever it was, he wanted it out. Who knew how it had gotten there, which master had done what to him without his knowledge or consent?

“Yes. And once it's gone, I can close this hole and you won’t have to worry about any of this any more.”

“Then do it. I want it gone. Er… please?” He managed to remember his manners through the rising
anxiety. This thing needed to go, now.

Luckily, Ratchet seemed unfazed, and he nodded and patted his shoulder gently. “Lay down then, we can get this over with.” Knock Out complied, and he barely even noticed when Ratchet’s fingers moved to the base of his neck and tweaked something that sent him straight into stasis.
“Right.” Ratchet said, turning to get his tools in order while Breakdown hovered nearby, checking Knock Out’s vital signs with utmost care. “Let’s get this sorted out, can’t believe I didn’t notice it before. I suppose it was a mess in there, you’ve done well with it so far but you were right to call me in for this. Watch closely. One day, you’ll be doing this.” Ratchet added as he returned.

Watching him at work was always fascinating, how those blunt fingers could be so delicate and precise, how he could stay so calm and collected with his hands up to the wrist in someone else’s internal workings. It hardly seemed to take him any time at all to carefully pry the damaged part away from several important fuel lines and extract it through the hole in Knock Out’s chassis, and he gave it only the most cursory glance before he set it aside and went to work closing up the hole with a piece of spare plating from the back room, thicker than Knock Out’s own since it was made for the warriors of the tribe. That took longer, of course, since he had to carefully bend and cut it to shape, but by the time he straightened up with a creak of old joints the only indication that Knock Out had ever been injured was the shiny silver area across his chest that would need repainting.

“That should do it. Any questions, Breakdown?” Ratchet asked as he ran his fingers over the new welds, checking that he had smoothed them out properly.

“No sir, that was impressive. Just… what is that thing?”

“That, my student, is what we’re going to find out while our patient rests.” He reset the little cable cluster that he had used to put Knock Out under, then turned his back to examine the mysterious device they had extracted from him.

It was small, no bigger than Ratchet’s palm, and vaguely spherical with a few wires sticking out of the bottom of it. The most notable feature was the hole in the top where the branch had pierced it, shattering what appeared to be some kind of control circuit and punching a divot into the inside, which seemed to be packed with something white and odd-smelling. Ratchet frowned, carefully peeling back the shattered metal around the hole and sniffing at the contents, then his eyes widened in alarm and he set the thing down swiftly but with remarkable care and backed away, putting a hand out to push Breakdown with him as he did so.

“What? What is it?”

“That’s a bomb.” Ratchet didn’t quite sound like he believed it, and Breakdown felt the older medic lean on him a little, his fans whirring in barely-concealed distress. “Someone put a bomb in his chest. That poor bot has been walking around with a lump of fragging plastic explosive pressed up against his spark for Primus-knows how long and I don’t think he even knew.” He gained enough fortitude to let go of Breakdown after a moment, and by the end of the sentence there was a low burn of fury in his voice usually reserved for people who got others hurt through their own stupidity. No, not even that. Breakdown had never heard him so angry. He was too stunned to respond right away, thinking of all the times he’d probably brushed against that thing by accident, the number of times both he and Knock Out could have been blown to smithereens by careless ignorance.

“What do we do?” He eventually managed to ask. “Should we tell him?”
Ratchet sighed heavily, running a hand over his face and never quite taking his eyes off the bomb on the table. “We have to. He obviously didn’t know about this or he would have told us. I hope. And there might be more somewhere else in his body, ones that haven’t had their detonators destroyed. Why would anyone do this?”

“It must have been in case he escaped…” Breakdown realised, dawning horror making his fists clench so they wouldn’t shake. “Those, those monsters in the city, they would have blown him up if they couldn’t get him back!”

Knock Out stirred behind him and he clamped down on the urge to sweep him into a hug that he definitely wouldn’t have appreciated. He wanted nothing more than to protect him, but there would have been no protecting him from this if it hadn’t been for a sheer stroke of dumb luck. Instead he turned slowly, reset his vocaliser to a lower volume. “Easy, it’s okay. You’re okay,” he said quietly, and Knock Out responded with a staticky mumble in his native tongue which Breakdown couldn’t understand. He was vaguely aware of Ratchet gingerly scooping up the bomb in his cupped hands and shuffling away with it held at arm’s length, but his focus was on Knock Out’s face as the smaller bot cracked an eye open, the light within dim and flickering at first until it came online properly.

He flinched away from the looming shape over him instinctively, then he managed to focus and realised it was Breakdown and relaxed. Breakdown felt his spark twist, hating to see Knock Out afraid of him again. It took him a moment to remember how to speak, mouth moving with no sound a couple of times before he managed it. “What was it?” He asked, pushing himself up into a sitting position. He didn’t flinch when Breakdown offered a steadying hand, which eased his worry a little. Except, now he had to try to explain this. He vented hard, trying to find the right words.

“Someone put a bomb in you.” He said, and his spark sank at Knock Out’s blank look. Explaining this through mime would be awkward but he tried, closing one fist and laying the other over the top, then pulling them apart and spreading his fingers rapidly to represent an explosion. Judging by the way Knock Out’s eyes widened and he leaned back sharply, his hand over his now-smooth side, he understood. He looked like he might purge his tanks, and Breakdown reached out hesitantly to steady him, leaving an inch or so for Knock Out to cross if he wanted the touch. He leaned into it ever so slightly, warm under his palm. “We took it out. It was broken, safe. You’re safe.”

“How long had it been there?” Knock Out asked softly, his hand still pressed to the fresh welds.

“We don’t know. Ratchet can probably find out.” He hoped so, anyway. The old healer had thousands of years of experience to draw on, Breakdown didn’t remember seeing anything he couldn’t handle. But then, he’d never seen him look quite as afraid as he had when he’d realised what the bomb was.

He looked over his shoulder in time to see Ratchet re-emerge from the other room, grim-faced. “It’s been in place for some time.” He said, having apparently heard enough of their conversation. “I can’t tell exactly how long, but I would estimate at least half a century.”

“Oh.” Knock Out looked over at him, taking his hand away from his chest to support himself on Breakdown’s arm. “I… don’t think I’m much older than that. Could I have been built with it?”
“It wasn’t part of you, or your self-repair would have at least tried to fix it.” Ratchet’s frown deepened as he mulled over the problem. “Do you remember having any other surgery done?”

Knock Out frowned, looking down his body and away from Ratchet, and Breakdown felt his spark sink all over again as he drew his knees up closer to his body. “Some. I don’t know what all of it was for. Sometimes I woke up and everything seemed the same. Sometimes… not.”

“What did they do to you?” Ratchet asked, his eyes narrowing, and for a moment Breakdown thought he heard something behind the professional demeanour. Something pained. Knock Out didn’t respond right away, though he did glance up warily, almost as though he expected Ratchet to explode at whatever he said next. “Whatever they wanted. Whatever was useful to them. I’m lucky; I still think for myself.” He flinched away when Ratchet’s fist curled, but of course the old healer didn’t strike him. He would never harm a patient, Breakdown knew, it was the first rule he had taught him. Besides, it wasn’t Knock Out he was angry at. “Those monsters will never harm you again.” He said, his voice low and rough, and Knock Out leaned into Breakdown’s hand as he turned to gaze up at him, his eyes wide in wonder. “The tribe are your family now, we will protect you.”

“Family…” Knock Out repeated the word, clearly not understanding, and for a moment Ratchet looked like something important had just broken inside him. He quickly schooled his expression and waved Breakdown off before he could ask if he was okay. “Yes. We take care of each other. And that means I’m going to make you rest for a while, and then we’ll see about finding you somewhere more permanent to live now that you’re mostly fixed up. Alright?”

“Alright. Thank you, Ratchet.” Knock Out still looked troubled, but he obeyed and let Breakdown guide him back down onto the berth, laying on his good side with his arm tucked carefully over the welds. Breakdown had to resist the urge to pat his shoulder as they parted; he looked so fragile like that and leaving him felt unsafe, but what would hurt him in the middle of the camp? Ratchet had already left the tent by the time he caught up to him, and he had to jog and call the old healer’s name to get his attention. “Ratchet! Are you… okay? You seemed pretty upset back there.” “I’m fine, Breakdown. I need to tell Optimus about this development. It’s something to look out for if we encounter any other escaped slaves from the cities.” he said, rubbing the chevron on his forehead and closing his eyes for a moment. Processor ache, clearly. Breakdown could relate. But if anyone could make Ratchet feel better, it would be his mate, so he nodded and added a respectful gesture for good measure. “I’ll let you go. He’s gonna be fine, we got rid of it.”

“Good to see you managed to pick up some bedside manner from me, sparkling. Off you go.” Ratchet added with a small, tired smile, then turned to head for the tent he shared with the tribe’s leader. Breakdown watched him go, his own optics dim with worry, but Bulkhead’s voice snapped him out of his reverie as the warrior clapped him on the shoulder and promptly dragged him off to come patrol with him. He almost managed to convince himself that he wasn’t worried about Knock Out as he stumbled off after him, token protests drifting behind him. Knock Out would be fine, there was nowhere safer in the world than this camp. He was sure.
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